MY STORY

MY STORY

KAMALA DAS

STERLING PUBLISHERS PRIVATE LTD
Jullundur-3 New Delhi-110016

My Story

Published by S.K. Ghai, Managing Director, Sterling Publishers (P) Ltd., AB/9, Safdarjang Enclave, New Delhi-110016
Printed at Sterling Printers, L-11, Green Park Extension, New Delhi-110016

PREFACE

My Story is my autobiography which I began writing during my first serious bout with heart disease. The doctor thought that writing would detract my mind from the fear of a sudden death, and, besides, there were all the hospital bills to be taken care of. I sent a telegram to an editor who had been after me to write such a book to be used as a serial in his journal. He arrived after a day bringing with him the total remuneration for the serial. He was taking a risk, as I was then very ill and it did not seem likely that I would be able to write more than a few chapters. And yet, he agreed to the deal, seated near me, holding my hand which had a green, withered look. From that moment the book took hold of me, carrying me back into the past rapidly as though it were a motor boat chug chugging through the inky waters at night. Between short hours of sleep induced by the drugs given to me by the nurses, I wrote continually, not merely to honour my commitment but because I wanted to empty myself of all the secrets so that I could depart when the time came, with a scrubbed-out conscience.

My recovery was such an anti-climax! The serial had begun to appear in the issues of the journal which flooded the bookstalls in Kerala. My relatives were embarrassed. I had disgraced my well-known family by telling my readers that I had fallen in love with a man other than my lawfully wedded husband. Why, I had even confessed that I was chronically falling in love with persons of a flamboyant nature. When I went for a short vacation to my home state I received no warmth. In a hurry I escaped back to Bombay. This book has cost me many things that I held dear, but I do not for a moment regret having written it. I have written several books in my life time, but none of them provided the pleasure the writing of *My Story* has given me. I have nothing more to say.

Kamala Das

CONTENTS

Preface

1. The humiliation of a brown child in a European school 1
2. About childhood nightmares and the only "good friend" 4
3. Each poem of mine made me cry 7
4. Nalapat House gifted by amorous chieftain 10
5. In the secret drawer was a brown bottle which smelt of Ambergris 14
6. I was infatuated with his charm 17
7. Women of good Nair families never mentioned sex 21
8. Lonely Goddess 24
9. They would have liked him to go to bed with a ghost every night 28
10. She was half-crazed with love and hardly noticed me 32
11. The girls in boarding schools came from a very different background 36
12. Homely Annie gets handsome young lover ! 40
13. The nuns used to censor the letters we wrote 44
14. "I wanted to marry a rich man...to be a snob" 48
15. We were subjected to subtle sadism of several kinds 51
16. I prayed to the Sun God to give me a male child 55
17. One morning the Sanyasi had gone...only the smell of opium remained 58

18. Was every married adult a clown in bed, a circus performer ? 62
19. Her voice was strange...it was easy for me to fall in love with her 66
20. She lay near me, holding my body close to hers 70
21. His hands bruised my body and left blue and red marks on the skin 74
22. Wedding night : Again and again he hurt me and all the while the Kathakali drums throbbed dully 79
23. A gold coin for love 83
24. I sent the cook out to get some barbiturates 87
25. The blood-stained moonlight 91
26. The first chapter of darkness 95
27. For the first time in my life I learned to surrender totally 99
28. My love was like alms looking for a begging bowl 103
29. I still yearned for my grey-eyed friend 107
30. Sex and the co-operative movement 111
31. He walked in silence for a few yards ahead of me... 115
32. It was the beginning of delightful death 120
33. Passing away of my great grandmother 124
34. Again and again the same man phoned 127
35. Calcutta's cocktail season 130
36. I was Carlo's Sita 134
37. For the first time I saw the eunuchs dance in Calcutta 137
38. Delhi streets were fragrant and murky...I felt very young 141
39. Calicut gets a good crop of lunatics 145
40. Like the phoenix I rose from the ashes of my past 150

41. I withdrew into the cave I had made for myself 154

42. The last of my lovers : handsome dark one with a tattoo between his eyes 158

43. "I too tried adultery for a short while" 162

44. I was never a nymphomaniac... 167

45. Return to Nalapat : Was my 24-year-old marriage on the rocks? 171

46. Only the wealthy hated lust me...they spread lush scandals about me 177

47. The sorcerer came on a bike at night... 181

48. The ancient hungers that once tormented me were fulfilled 185

49. Who were we to sit beside their favourite God ? 189

50. I have ceased to fear death... 193

1

The humiliation of a brown child in a European school

When I was a little child growing up in Calcutta, the British still ruled India. But in good society they behaved like our equals. It was normal for a British family to have one or two close friends among the Indians with whom they were on visiting terms.

My father's superior at that time was a balding, redfaced gentleman named Ross who called my father "my good friend Nair" whenever he came to our house, thrilling all of us to our very bones.

When we went once to Malabar for a month's stay with my grandmother, we lent our cook to Mrs. Ross so that she might teach him the rudiments of European cookery. With every vacation that we took, our cook advanced more and more in the culinary arts until our eating habits had to be altered to suit his sophistication.

Instead of the rice and curry, he served us soups, cutlets and a stew. For my mother he cooked a plate of rice and lentils because he felt that it was too late to change her tastes. My father ate with a fork and knife. The children, my elder brother and I, eating early and unsupervised, ate Western meals with our little brown fingers, licking our hands, enjoying all that was served on our plates while the cook stood by, frowning. He thought us savages.

My father was always busy with his work at the automobile firm where he was employed, selling Rolls Royces, Humbers

and Bentleys to the Indian princes and their relatives. My mother, vague and indifferent, spent her time lying on her stomach on a large four-post bed, composing poems in Malayalam. We had no full-time maid at that time. The cook took us to the European school a furlong away and brought us back in the afternoon.

He was not of an affectionate nature. So we grew up more or less neglected, and because we were aware of ourselves as neglected children in a social circle that pampered the young, there developed between us a strong relationship of love, the kind a leper may feel for his mate who pushed him on a hand-cart when they went on their begging rounds.

My brother was plump and dark. His eyes were bright and circular. Although he was the cleverest in his class, the white boys made fun of him and tortured him by pushing a pointed pencil up his nostril. One day his shirt-front was covered with blood. He was stunned by the cruelty but even the tears seemed inhibited, staying suspended on his lashes while William the bully exclaimed "Blackie, your blood is red". I scratched his face in a mad rage, but was soon overpowered by the tough Anglo-Indians who were always on the other side, fighting for the white man's rights. We did not tell our parents of the tortures we underwent at school for wearing, under the school uniform of white twill, a nut-brown skin.

Occasionally the school would get a distinguished visitor, a bird of bright plumage alighting for a short while, a Governor's wife, a white moustached admiral or a lady in grey silks claiming relationship with the family at Buckingham Palace.

I do not know how our lady-principal, whom we called Madam, managed to lure such august personages in. Ours was not a big school. Perhaps it was because we sang the National Anthem, Rule Britannia, louder than the others. In the morning while Madam sat at the grand piano on which stood the tinted photograph of the British royal family and we raised our voices in song, singing Britons never never shall be slaves, even the postman slowed his walk to listen. King George the sixth, (God save his soul) used to wink at us from the gilt frame, as

though he knew that the British were singing in India their swan song....

Shirley Temple was the rage then with her golden ringlets and her toothy smile. All the little girls copied her. Our school hung her picture on the wall behind the piano. We had in my class another Shirley. A Scot with pink cheeks and yellow ringlets. When the dignitaries arrived, it was always Shirley who carried up the bouquet.

Once she was asked to read a poem that I had composed and when the visitor asked who wrote it, our principal said, Shirley of course, she is a combination of beauty and brains, and then there was from the Governor's wife a special kiss. What a bright little moppet, she said.

When the visitors came the brown children were always discreetly hidden away, swept under the carpet, told to wait in the corridor behind the lavatories where the school ayahs kept them company. None of us looked too pretty in those days. There were six in all, counting Louis the black Anglo-Indian who could not make up his mind which side to take. If we were hated by the white children, poor Louis was hated more but he followed them about, clowning to put them in good humour, barking like a dog and neighing like an ass....

2

About childhood nightmares and the only "good friend"

In the year 1928 when my father got married, Mahatma Gandhi's influence was at its highest. The simplicity that he preached appealed to the middle classes. My father soon after the betrothal stipulated firmly that his wife was not to wear anything but Khaddar and preferably white or off-white.

After the wedding he made her remove all the gold ornaments from her person, all except the 'mangalsutra'. To her it must have seemed like taking to widow's weeds, but she did not protest. She was mortally afraid of the dark stranger who had come forward to take her out of the village and its security. She was afraid of her father and afraid of her uncle, the two men who plotted and conspired to bring for the first time into the family a bridegroom who neither belonged to any royal family nor was a Brahmin.

The Nalapat family's financial position at that time was precarious. All the jewellery had been sold for fighting off litigation and bankruptcy. My father was not an ideal landlord. He worked for his living in Calcutta. This was a point in his favour.

When the young couple left for Calcutta my grandmother went along with them to get them settled. My mother did not fall in love with my father. They were dissimilar and horribly mismated. But my mother's timidity helped to create an illusion of domestic harmony which satisfied the relatives and friends. Out of such an arid union were born the first two children, my

brother and I, bearing the burden of a swarthy skin and ordinary features.

We must have disappointed our parents a great deal. They did not tell us so, but in every gesture and in every word it was evident. It was evident on the days when my father roared at us and struggled to make us drink the monthly purgative of pure castor oil. This used to be one of our childhood nightmares, the ordeal of being woken out of sleep before dawn to have the ounce-glass thrust into our mouths and rough hands holding our lips closed so that we swallowed the stuff and sank back on our pillows with tears of humiliation streaming from our eyes....

Gradually our instincts told us to keep away from the limelight, to hide in the vicinity of the kitchen where we could hold together the tatters of our self-respect and talk to the scavenger or the gardener who brought for the brass flower vases of our drawing room bunches of marigolds or astors every morning, plucking them from the old European cemetery behind our house.

We lived on the top floor of the repair-yard of the motor car company. One had to climb thirty-six steps to reach our flat. Midway, there was to the right an opening which led on to the servants' quarters where night and day a faucet leaked noisily, sadly. There was a stench of urine which made one pause precisely on that step of the staircase wondering where it came from.

But upstairs in the drawing room where visitors came so rarely there was the smell of starch and flowers. We had white Khaddar curtains that were taken down and changed every fortnight. My brother and I on holidays sat near the full-sized windows looking out and at times dangling some rubber toy on a string to intrigue the passers-by. If someone tugged at the string, we pulled it up in a hurry and hid in the bedroom fearing deliciously that he may come up to grab us. It was an enthralling pastime.

We had only one good friend, just one friend who liked to touch our hands and talk to us about life in general. This was

a burly gent named Menon who worked as the Stores Manager of the Motor Car company. When our mother slept in the warm afternoons we slipped out of the house to visit him while he sat at his table ordering long tumblers of frothy tea which he drank blowing on it and wetting his handle-bar moustache.

At that time there was a Malayali family who were friendly with ours. They had two sons and the youngest of them, a puny, pale child had a doll's house which he once showed off when we visited him. Of this I spoke to our friend Menon and perhaps he felt moved, for in a month's time he brought for me a large doll's house complete with dainty furniture which he had whittled all by himself. This was placed on the round table which had the brass top, and at night when the lights were switched on, it shone in all its varnished glory like a Taj Mahal. The friend's house was a hut compared to ours. Off and on we ran into the drawing room to take just another peek into the dining room, or to smell the red paint of the roof.

When the western windows of the drawing room were opened the corrugated roof of the factory came into view. On this, noisily pattered the feet of the monkeys who lived on the trees of the cemetery. Occasionally one of them would creep into our house and steal a coconut or a loaf of bread from the kitchen. One day while the cook was shouting obscenities at the thieving ape the scavenger said, "Thakur, don't speak so to any monkey. He may be Lord Hanuman himself, come to test your devotion."

The cook was not at all religious. He made fun of all the Hindu Gods, hurting the sentiments of the occasional maid and the scavenger. One day the scavenger said that the cook ought to go to Vilayat and settle down there, he was such a Saheb. "Yes, I will," said the cook. "Mrs. Ross, the white Memsaheb will take me to England as her cook if I tell her that I am willing to leave this country." The scavenger gave a sceptical smile. Ram Ram, he muttered, drinking tea in an enamel mug that was kept aside for him....

3

Each poem of mine made me cry

On our way to school on some privileged days the cook used to get for us the narrow limp strips of Nestles' chocolate which came in wrappings of glazed red paper with a coloured photo of the British royal family tucked inside its second layer. We collected enough to be able to demand an album from the dealer.

We had also the habit of collecting cuttings from the newspapers for a political album. This contained all the photographs of Hitler and Mussolini who were undoubtedly the greatest heroes in our eyes at that time. The newspapers gave their speeches maximum coverage, built them up into supermen. We secretly hoped to be like them when we grew up.

At this time my brother thought it a good idea to start a manuscript magazine. None of our contemporaries could turn out essays or poems because they felt diffident about their spelling. So the responsibility fell on my shoulders.

I was six and very sentimental. I wrote sad poems about dolls who lost their heads and had to remain headless for eternity. Each poem of mine made me cry. My brother illustrated the verses and wrote faintly political articles.

We had two tutors. Mabel, a pretty Anglo-Indian and Nambiar, the Malayalam tutor. The cook was partial to the lady, served her tea on a tray with tiny sandwiches laid out on a quarter-plate, and to Nambiar who came much later in the evening he gave only a glass-tumbler of tea and a few sardonic remarks. Nambiar, in our house, moved about with a heavy

inferiority complex and would hide behind the side-board when my father passed through the dining room where we had our Malayalam lessons. We learnt our vernacular only to be able to correspond with our grandmother who was very fond of us.

One day all the children of our school were taken to the Victoria Gardens for a picnic. We were given sugarcane-juice and ham-sandwiches which, being vegetarian I threw away behind the flowering bushes. The young school-mistress kept shrieking out "Oh Archie, Oh. Archie" every now and then to the dark history-teacher while he tried most unsuccessfully to grab her and kiss her. She ran round the trees escaping his clutches, all the while laughing gaily as though it was a big joke.

I went away to the farthest fence and lay near a hedge of Henna which had sprouted its tiny flowers. The sun was white that day, a white lamp of a sun on the winter sky, I was lonely. Oh I was so lonely that day. No one seemed to want my company, not even my brother who was playing a kind of football with his classmates. Helen, the only girl who could dance, was telling the others of the film called "The Blue Bird." I wondered why I did not join the girls who crowded around her.

I wondered why I was born to Indian parents instead of to a white couple, who may have been proud of my verses. Then suddenly like the clatter of pots and pans, harsh words attacked my privacy. What on earth are you doing here Kamala, shouted the teacher. Why don't you join the others ? What a peculiar child you are. And the white sun filled my eyes with its own loneliness. The smell of Henna flowers overwhelmed me. Sobbing, I rose and walked toward my teacher. The children stared at me. The teacher laughed, and as though it was a signal for them to begin laughing too, they broke into high laughter. The birds on the trees flew away....

In the afternoon occasionally I slipped out of the gate while the fat watchman slept soundly on his charpoy and walked to the old cemetery. The tombstones were like yellowed teeth and even the writing had faded with the rains of half a century. But it was thrilling to read the words that had not faded and to

know that Elizabeth Hardinge was borne in 1818 but died in 1938. Who was Elizabeth ? Who was Roger Upton who died only at the age of eighty-three ? Who was Rosamund ? Except for monkeys I was the only living creature there, but the red bougainvillae, gaudy as spilt blood, that had climbed the minarets, swung in the breeze. The marigolds dipped their heads in curtsy. The monkeys ignored me and suckled their young.

I was too young to know about ghosts. It was possible for me to love the dead as deeply as I loved the living. I could even go up to the un-known Rosamund and confide in her. From the dead no harshness could emanate, no cruelty....

4

Nalapat House gifted by amorous chieftain

When the Second World War threatened to grow into an interminable horror my father decided to send us to our ancestral home in Malabar which was called the Nalapat House.

The house, though not large by the local standards, had an inner courtyard and a temple situated inside the main hall which opened out to the south. There was a gatehouse which had a steep staircase running up to the luxuriously furnished bedroom where my grand uncle slept at night, a portico supported by pillars that led on to a higher portico where the Ottanthullal dancers performed several times a year, a hall where the men sat down to eat their meals, a dining hall for the women of the house, the servants' quarters, three small bedrooms on the ground floor, three bedrooms on the first floor overlooking a narrow verandah and an attic where the old trunks and palanquins were stored.

To the south of the house was the snake-shrine which was at least two thousand years old, where the idols of Renuka and her father Vasuki were worshipped and beyond that stretched the regions of the dead, the Sradhappura, the house built for cooking food for the dead on their death anniversaries, and the coconut estate where after each cremation a tree was planted in memory of the newly deceased. There was a bath house near the pond and a crocodile that came out in the afternoon after the servants had also finished their baths, to lie in the sun with its mouth open to trap the dragon-flies.

To the north there were the usual cattle-sheds and the grain-husking yard. Above all those structures like a green canopy

hung the leaves of the many trees that my ancestress Kunji had planted during her honeymoon days. Large trees bearing flowers or fruits threw scatter-rugs of green shadow all around the house where we played throughout the day, my brother and I.

The house was gifted to my ancestress, the 15-year-old Kunji by her new and doting husband after she had come to his village, fleeing from the burning city of Cochin, where she had gone with her uncles to attend a relative's wedding. An aristocrat was to be shown to her at Cochin who was to marry her if she liked his face and if her uncles approved of his deportment.

But the English East India Company was not aware of all those delicious schemes, when they decided to blow up the most important trade-port to weaken the power of the Dutch from whom they had just then wrested the city. It was at that time beautiful with well-laid-out streets and gardens. The Portuguese churches had been transformed into warehouses by the Dutch who were not religious but were artistic enough to call their streets by musical names like de Linde Straat and de Bloomendaal Straat.

To spite the Dutch and their last Indian Governor, Von Spall, the English Governor blew up with gunpowder the magnificent warehouses and the residences of the traders and the Nair barons. Women and children perished in the blaze. The ones who escaped from the burning city with the connivance of the English and their secret allies were too dazed to speak of their ordeal.

Kunji, accompanied by a servant, bearing two Dutch trunks painted red and gold, made her way towards home, the principality of Alengad which included Alwaye but was made to change her route by an amorous chieftain who brought her over to his village and married her. He was well-versed in Astrology and Architecture. He chose the site for the Nalapat House and designed it.

To the east lay lush paddy-fields and also to the north. From the west the blue and frothy Arabian Sea roared at night. Near the snake-shrine was the rare Nirmatala tree which burst into

bloom every summer with large butter-coloured flowers that filled even the inner rooms with perfume.

When we went there as children, the Nalapat House had seven occupants, not counting the servants. My grandmother, my aunt Ammini, my grand uncle, the poet, my great grandmother, her two sisters and Mahatmaji.

Will Mahatmaji approve, whispered the old ladies of the household to one another at the beginning of any activity. It was as if Mahatma Gandhi was the head of the Nalapat House. His photographs hung in every room. Even the servants felt his presence in the house and began wearing Khaddar.

My grandmother spun Khadi yarn on a thakli holding it aloft over her head in the afternoon, while the others slept and the old windows creaked in the heat. She was plumb, fair-skinned and good-looking. Her throat, whenever I nestled close to her, smelled of sandal wood. She told me of the trip the ladies of the family once made to Guruvayoor to donate their jewellery to the Harijan Fund.

Mahatmaji had talked in Hindi and in English which they could not anyway understand, but his smile hypnotised them. All the jewellery was given away. I thought of Gandhiji as a brigand, although I did not speak my mind then. I thought it his diabolic aim to strip the ladies of all their finery so that they became plain and dull. Austerity seemed meaningless at that time of my life. And, a cruel practical joke!

My aunt Ammini was an attractive woman who kept turning down all the marriage proposals that came her way. She wore only white Khaddar and did not use oil on her wavy hair. She chose to lead the life of an ascetic, but when she was alone in her bedroom facing the fragrant Parijatam tree she sat on the window sill and recited the love-songs written by Kumaranasan, whose poetry was fashionable then. It was while listening to her voice that I sensed for the first time that love was a beautiful anguish and a *thapasya*....

My grand uncle Narayana Menon was a famous poet-philosopher. He occupied the portico where the easy chairs were placed and the table with the heavy books. There was above

his chair a *punkah* made of wood and covered with calico ruffles, which a servant seated far away could move by pulling on its string. Beside his chair was a hookah which my grand-aunt meticulously cleaned every morning. Grand uncle looked every inch a king, although he did not have enough money even to buy the books that he wished to read.

To the south of the portico was the grilled library ruled by an ill-assorted group consisting of Blavatsky, Gurdjieff, Havelock Ellis and Varahamihira. The Nalapat House had the finest library of palm leaf manuscripts, most of which were written in the Vattezhuthu that probably came to Malabar from the Phoenicians.

My grand uncle must have been a lonely man, for he had no friend living nearby who could discuss with him the subjects he was interested in. With the callers he talked about the petty scandals floating about in the literary world and laughed engagingly, clapping his pink palms. He was witty and eloquent and even toward the end of his life when cataract made reading impossible, he remained cheerful, trying to turn his attention to the study of classical music.

At my grand uncle's evening durbar there were occasionally brilliant grammarians and writers who came from long distances to stay with him, but they were tongue-tied, and awed by his presence.

5

In the secret drawer was a brown bottle which smelt of Ambergris

My great grandmother's younger sister was a poetess. I read her verses only thirty years after she died. When I went as a six-year-old to stay with the old people at Nalapat, she was lying paralyzed in the dark bedroom next to the servants' quarters. She lay like a broken doll, a pale-faced toy, thrown haphazardly on the bed by a child in a hurry, but her eyes, miraculously left unclouded by the disease, moved continually feeding themselves with an odd and greed on those who came near her.

When the feeding was done and the rubber sheets changed, the adults of the house left her alone, murmuring, go to sleep. But sleep seemed alien to her, for even at midnight while my grandmother sleepily walked to the kitchen to fetch me a glass of water I used to look in and find the sick one's limpid eyes wide open. Her name was Ammalu. It was not seemly for a Nair child to call an aged relative by name but I called her Ammalu. She could not protest anyway. Quite often on holidays I sat on her bed, on the squeaking rubber sheets, telling her of my classmates. At times her lips trembled a little as though she wished to make a comment but no sound issued forth. She communicated with her eyes, within which little flames leapt up each time I entered her room and took her hand in mine.

The old ladies of the house told me of Ammalu's passion for order. She was a spinster who chose to remain unmarried al-

though pretty and eligible. She was finicky about cleanliness and bathed thrice a day. It was difficult to find her at any hour of the day without a dampness in her hair, and without a sprig of basil in its curls. She read profusely and scribbled in the afternoon while the others had their siesta behind shuttered windows, lying sprawled on thin reed-mats on the cool black floor. She spoke very little and went out only to attend the annual Ekadasi festival of the Guruvayur temple. Sitting concealed behind the wooden rails of a verandah she watched the procession of caparisoned elephants which thrilled her. The tattoo of the temple drums and the wail of the sacred conch, she heard with a smile. She was deeply devout and spent the grey hours of dusk in prayer.

Finally the cold baths destroyed her. Paralysis struck her without a warning during the monsoon while she had just got out of the pond after her morning bath. She collapsed in a heap emitting a loud scream. This cry, agonized as a tortured bird's, was the last sound she produced in her life. For two years, until I came on the scene, she lay still, enjoying the companionship of the sparrows that flew into her room, tweeting comfortingly. I became her cherished friend, for there was nothing that I could not tell her. If she smiled a smile at all, behind that closed face of hers, I saw its gleam in the eyes.

One day when I returned from the Elementary School where I had been admitted, I saw her lie all wrapped up in unbleached cotton, on the floor inside a large rectangle decorated with grains of rice and burning wicks nestling in coconut-halves. What is she doing here, I asked my grandmother. Only the pale face was visible, and the eyes were closed. Prostrate yourself at her feet, said my grandmother, she is leaving us. Ammalu is dead, whispered my brother. Then we were hustled out and told to stay upstairs until the next morning. I missed my evening monologue with the paralyzed one.

Won't she ever get up from there, I asked my brother. You are a fool, said my brother, she is dead and soon they will burn her. Then I broke down. They were already cutting down the heavy branches of the mango tree that stood as a sentinel outside her window, and before dusk we saw the white smoke rise

up in the southern compound near the damson tree. The South West breezes wafted in, burdened with a sweet stench of human flesh. Is Ammalu burning there, I asked my brother, and he solemnly nodded.

Nearly a year ago I returned to the Nalapat house, a middle-aged woman, broken by life's bitter trophies, and found among the old books some containing Ammalu's poems. I dusted the notebooks and carried them up to my room. Most of the poems were about KRISHNA. To Him she had been faithful. My chastity is my only gift to you, oh Krishna, she wrote in her last poem. Her writings disturbed me. I felt that after thirty years she was trying once again to communicate with the world and with me. There are no photographs to refresh my memory. Only the leaves of her books, yellowed like autumn-leaves lying on my desk, and a wooden chest which once held her clothes. And in the secret drawer of her writing box, a brown bottle shaped like a pumpkin that smells faintly of Ambergris....

The Nairs believe that the dead return for their treasured possessions and therefore they throw away or gift away to the poor all the clothes and other possessions of the dead as soon as the cremation is over. The gold ornaments are hastily melted and reshaped for the living, changing the design so totally that the ghost-owner does not get a chance to stake a claim. When we die, we die. On the site of my pyre my sons shall plant a coconut tree. Then some day one of my descendants may go up to the tree and rub her palm against its bark as I went up to poor Ammalu's tree and caressed it, murmuring futile messages to the dead....

6

I was infatuated with his charm

When I joined the Elementary School at Punnayurkulam, which was only two furlongs away from the Nalapat House, I felt that I had died a cultural death and was getting reborn into another kind of world where the hard-eyed British were no longer my co-rivals.

The children of our own field-hands and carpenters, dressed only in thin towels, were my new school-mates. One of them, the boy who shared a bench with me was Velu, who was always bleary eyed and had sores all over his body. His parents were respectable beggars who used to visit our house every morning for a handful of rice. Velu was yellow with malnutrition. On birthdays we used to organize a beggars' feast for which Velu used to come, tugged in by his father who twisted his ears to show off in front of us his parental privileges.

Two wooden pots of rice-gruel were placed in the compound under the largest mango tree and a cauldron of red curry. For the children there would be as an added delicacy, a big salted mango which the maidservants ladled out from the old tall urns that were kept inside the pantry. Give another mango to Velu, I used to shout to the servants who were in charge of the distribution, give more gruel to Velu, give more of the curry....And, Velu, the sore-eyed, many-scabbed guest, would flash a friendly smile in my direction.

Another school-mate was plump Devaki, who once wrote me a love letter and handed it to me most furtively, hiding behind the school privy. "Don't read it now", she said, "take it

home and read it when you are alone. I have unloaded my mind, my heart and my soul." I was mystified by the words. When I reached home and my grandmother found the letter in my pocket, she did not allow me to read it beyond the pening sentence, "my dearest darling." My grandmother was very upset. She told me that I was not to associate with Devaki who had proved herself to be wicked, writing such letters to innocents like me.

After the week-end when Devaki asked me for a reply I lied to her that I was not yet proficient enough in Malayalam to be able to write a letter and that probably before the year was out I would be writing her a long loving letter. She grew bored with me and turned for emotional solace to an older girl. They exchanged love letters in the privy every morning for months until one day the Maths teacher caught them at it and scolded them.

There was a boy in the eighth standard which was adjacent to my class in the same dusty hall. He was considered an outlaw by the teachers who took a sadistic delight in punishing him every day. He was handsome and had a dimple on his right cheek which appeared only when he smiled. I could hardly take my eyes off his face. I was so infatuated with his charm. Once when he wrote some obscenity at recess on the blackboard, the class-master slapped him hard. I could, from my class, see the red weals on his cheek. Govinda Kurup, the outlaw, merely smiled and muttered something to his benchmate, making him blush and hang down his head. Get out of the class, shouted the angry teacher, Govinda Kurup, leave the class immediately. The boy kilted up his dhoti and walked away whistling. At that moment I wanted to follow him and tell him that if he were wicked, I was fond of wickedness too....

One day I told my grandmother, lying close to her at night, I want to marry Govinda Kurup. Don't be stupid, said my grandmother, but she laughed and seemed amused. One afternoon during our summer vacation, we were seated on the ledge of the snakeshrine playing with dice when we saw Govinda Kurup enter the gate and walk towards us. There were six of us, my brother and I, and four of our cousins who lived nearby.

I do not know what prompted Govinda Kurup to enter a stranger's house, but he seemed to be in high spirits, and started to tell us of a practical joke he played on the Sewing Mistress of the School.

When his voice rose in enthusiasm I was terrified, for I knew that my grand-uncle did not like to be disturbed in his siesta. A few minutes later grand uncle did come down to roar at the intruder. Who is this urchin, shouted grand-uncle, who invited him here ? My grand uncle, although a poet and a philosopher, was an utter snob. He believed in prescribing for the lower middle classes and the poor a decorum that we, by the happy fact of our high descent, did not have to observe. He showed them their places. He was also impatient with people who were unintelligent. But he was kind to the children of the family. He used to bring us from Trichur copying pencils picked up from his publishers.

My grand-uncle liked to see women glamorized with jewels and flowers. His second wife, my favourite aunt, was never seen even at night without her heavy jewellery, all gem-encrusted and radiant, and the traditional cosmetics of the Nair woman, the dab of turmeric on the cheeks, the sandal-line on the forehead, the collyrium in the eye and the betel in the mouth. She used a perfume that was popular then with the Muslims, called *Otto dil Bahar*. Her house, the Ambazeth House, was the first large house to sprout in the vicinity of ours. She was the daughter of a very wealthy Zamindar who believed in sending his children off to Britain to pick up their education, so she could have made a much more gainful marriage, but for the fact that she had leucodermic spots on her body which she kept concealed for some years taking baths in the bathroom, while the other ladies splashed about merrily in the family pond.

When the spots spread to the arms she confided in my grand uncle who married her out of compassion. There developed between the two a strong bond that was radically sex-based. My grand-uncle had written at that time a book on sex, the 'Rati Samrajya' which was an academic study based on the writings of Havelock Ellis and the Indian sexologists.

I have heard my grand uncle tell his wife that she was the most empty-headed woman he had known. She used to laugh melodiously at such comments. At night she enslaved him with her voluptuous body. So she could well afford to humour him in the day. Each night she came to our house accompanied by her maids and a lantern, looking like a bride. And, she walked up the steep staircase of the gatehouse to meet her famous husband in their lush bedroom, kept fragrant with license and jasmine-garlands....

7

Women of good Nair families never mentioned sex

Until my wedding-night I did not have the slightest knowledge of what went on between men and women in the process of procreation. Sex was not a fashionable word then as it is now, but its followers were certainly not inactive.

We had at the Nalapat House a kitchen-maid who used to flirt continually with the cook who had decided anyway to make her his wife as soon as his chit-fund matured to render him rich enough to buy the wedding-finery. The marriage of the Nairs, particularly that of the poorer ones, was extremely simple, the ritual lasting only a minute or two, for, all that the man had to do was to hand over to the woman a length of cloth and when she accepted it she became his wife.

Cloth was presumably an expensive commodity in olden Malabar and was precious. It was not easy then for the heads of the matriarchal families to clothe daintily the nieces, although the girls required only two and a half yards as underwear and two yards as overwear. The breasts were covered solely by the heavy necklaces they wore.

Our cook planned to take a trip to the bazars of Trichur to pick the bridal muslins and he kept pratting on and on about his exotic plans until the girl's patience grew thin. It was during this period of discontent that her swinging gait caught the fancy of a rich relative of ours who began to lure her into a vacant house every noon to coax her to part with her morals. When his ardour grew he began, Profumo-wise, to write little

missiles of letters shooting them at her while she walked beneath his balcony. One of those cloying dispatches fell into the hands of my grandmother who promptly dismissed the girl from our service.

The cook then began to steal out in the evenings to visit and console the erring wench. One day while he was returning from a temple-festival, the rich man's henchmen pounced upon him and throwing rocks at him, wounded him. He came to our house stumbling over the steps, blind with the blood flowing into his eyes and onto his naked chest. My grandmother was horrified. She thrust a fistful of granulated sugar into the wound on his forehead, stemming the flow. He mumbled his rival's name and fell asleep on the wooden garner in which we stored the oilcakes for our cows. In the morning there was only some congealed blood on the garner where he lay and he had vanished.

When my grandmother sent a servant to his village to seek him out his parents told him that he had not come there at all. The servants scraped the blood off the garner with a knife and washed it with some water mixed with cow-dung. It was as if some wild beast, a carnivore, had come there in the night and had had its kill. The rich man stopped seeing our former kitchen-maid and soon married a moon-faced cousin who quarreled with him every night, sobbing so hysterically that his uncles had to knock at his bedroom's door and intervene.

No wonder the women of the best Nair families never mentioned sex. It was their principal phobia. They associated it with violence and bloodshed. They had been fed on the stories of Ravana who perished due to his desire for Sita and of Kichaka, who was torn to death by Draupadi's legal husband Bhima only because he coveted her. It was customary for the Nair girl to marry when she was hardly out of her childhood and it was also customary for the much older husband to give her a ride shock by his sexual haste on the wedding-night. The only heroine whose sex-life seemed comparatively untumultuous was Radha who waited on the banks of Jumna for her blueskinned lover. But she was another's wife and so an adulteress. In

the orbit of licit sex, there seemed to be only crudeness and violence.

The next kitchen maid to arrive at Nalapat was the pale Kunhukutty who came from a village across the Connolly canal, ferried in by a barge, and she carried with her a bundle of clothes. She was short in stature and had a fine tracery of blue veins on her throat. My grandmother was satisfied with her deportment. She spoke only in monosyllables and in a nasal voice that reminded us of a pig. She was a hearty eater but on some evenings she went behind the cattle-shed and vomited all that she ate.

One day I followed her and stood behind her watching while she threw up noisily and wiped the perspiration from her face with the corner of her dhoti. What is wrong with you, I asked her. It is nothing, she said. I ate a lot of green tamarind today, and that is why I am sick. Every time I eat green tamarind I get sick. Don't tell your grandmother about it....And, I asked her why she insisted on eating green tamarind when she knew how bad it was for her system. I am not educated like all of you, I don't know English or anything like that, she said. I am only a poor and ignorant girl. What can a girl like me do but be foolish....

I thought her an awful fool. One or two months later I woke from my sleep in the morning hearing a commotion downstairs. Change your clothes and get out this minute, shouted my grandmother at Kunhukutty who stood in a pool of blood outside her dingy room. I looked around. The walls were spattered with blood. What has happened, I asked my grandmother. She only gave me a shove.

In half an hour's time Kunhukutty was ready with her bundle and all, to take leave of us, and, the field-hand who was assigned the responsibility of putting her on the ferry-boat muttered profanities waiting at the gate. It was obvious to me that the kitchen-maid had fallen from favour. I did not know what her crime was. It seemed more like an accident to me. Had she fallen from the rafters and hurt herself ?

Later the cook told me that she was only an immoral woman and that she had conducted on herself an abortion. The words were new to me and made no sense. Your grandmother is too good a person to suspect anything ill of anybody, said the cook. The moment I saw this one walking in with her dirty bundle I knew she was bad. But who ever listens to my advice ?

8

Lonely Goddess

Beyond the northern rice-fields lived Lazar, the oil-seller who drove his white cow and the three women of his house round and round his old mill, to extract oil from the copra and the sesame while he rested, leaning against a tree, abusing them in pornographic language which only amused his victims, for he was always a good provider and they were, by nature, masochistic.

He had gifted to each of them gold-chains and heavy earrings. He was a heavy drinker, but the oil from his mill was unadulterated. The sesame oil was frothy and sweet-smelling.

The wealthy ladies of the locality bought it for their oil-baths and mixed it with turmeric and sandalwood to make an unguent that was supposed to keep their skin golden and wrinkle-free. Lazar's son, who was a matriculate, carried the oil from door to door, but he was too conscious of his formal education to make any special effort to sell. The ladies appreciated his difficulty and bought the oil without haggling over its price. They were born hagglers, enjoying a good debate when the other pedlars arrived, carrying with them their wares, the glass-bangles, the reed-mats and the seasonal vegetables.

Behind Lazar's house were the thatched huts of the Pariahs who were by profession basket-weavers and sorcerers. Their women wore around their necks, strands of red beads and left their breasts uncovered. The poor people approached them for love-potions and for promise to destroy by terror their enemies. Therefore the Pariahs were regarded as outcastes and kept at a distance. But in the month of Makaram, between January and

February, they attained a sudden importance, for it was the month set aside for the worship of Kali to whom, being aboriginals, the Pariahs were dearly beloved.

It was in Makaram that they dressed themselves to look like her and came to our houses to dance. They wore gleaming breasts of brass, jingling anklets and large wigs of tarred palm-leaves. They were accompanied by the drummers and the reed-pipe players whose wail lashed at us like a ribbon of pain in the hot noon.

When Kali danced, we felt in the region of the heart an unease and a leap of recognition. Deep inside, we held the knowledge that Kali was older than the world and that having killed for others, she was now lonelier than all. All our primal instincts rose, to sing in our blood, the magical incantations. *Om Aim Hrim Klim Mahadurge Navakshari Navadurge Navaimike Navachandi Mahamaye Mahayoganidre*, darkness spawning light, night that begets the day, shame that fractures the oracle's voice and, blood's spilt roses in the sacrarium, *Rupam Dehi Sriyam Dehi Yaso Dehi Dvisho Jahi*.

In the month of Makaram, all the Bhagavati shrines sprang to life and blazed with their thousand lamps. Long lines of young women carrying in their hands a salver with a lamp, a coconut and other auspicious objects meandered towards the temples in the dark evenings, while the drums throbbed against their ears, mesmerising them so that their walk began to resemble the glide of a somnambulist and their eyes began to glow, nesting in the pupils the red flame of their lamps. After the orchestra ended, the oracle began his dance. He ran up and down, through the crowd of people brandishing his scimitar before his trance thickened and a tremor quickened his limbs. He leapt and he roared. His voice changed into the guttural voice of an angry Goddess. He whacked his own head with his scimitar. Then the trustee spoke soothing words. The oracle's son removed the scimitar from his father's hands, and rubbed turmeric into the wounds on his head. Kali was pacified for the time being. The people heaved sighs of relief and returned home.

The oracle used to visit the houses of the wealthy on some special days, escorted by the drummers and the trustee's men.

He danced in front of the elders, throwing on their bowed heads, rice to bless them with prosperity and he warbled, I shall protect you and your descendants from enemies and from disease, is this not enough...and, the eldest woman of the house said, that is enough, I am grateful, I am grateful....

While I grew as a child at the Nalapat House, I was trained to decorate the porch with paddy and coconut-blossom for the oracle's visit and to welcome him in the traditional way, leading him in with a lighted votary-lamp. I learned to light the temple-lamps and the many oiled wicks which had to be placed every evening at several spots around the house to honour the Gods of directions. The ancient scriptures too thought of the earth as a circular one. The North was presided over by Brahma, the South by Ananta, the East by Indra and the West by Varuna, the water-God. The North East was ruled by Siva, the North West by Vayu and between the two lay Kubera's kingdom. The South East was ruled by Agni and the South West by Ratri and somewhere between the two but above that of Ananta, was the dusky empire of Yama, the God of death.

In the quieter months, mainly during the rains, came the Ottanthullal dancer with his drummer and his cymbalist. He bought his kit of traditional make-up, the green Manola for his face, the powder to redden the eye and the collyrium. In his bundle was the wide gilt-crown, the skirt of ribbons and the imitation jewellery. The Nalapat House used to have those performances several times a year. I used to sit close to the dancer in the afternoon while he slowly and methodically painted up his face to resemble that of a supernatural being.

After the adults had had their siesta and their tea, the dance began. The roll of the drum brought the school-children and the poor to fill the courtyard. Friends and relatives sat on reed-mats, chewing betel. The tales were picked up from the Mahabharata. The one I liked best was Kalyana sougandhikam, which narrated the exploits of Bhima who went in search of the legendary flower that grew in a demon's garden, only because his wife Draupadi desired to adorn her hair with its petals. In day-dreams I too became a Draupadi who commanded her adoring mate to brave the demons to get flowers for her wavy tresses....

9

They would have liked him to go to bed with a ghost every night

My grand-uncles's mother, Madhavi Amma, was the daughter of the well-known sorcerer of Malabar, the eldest Namboodiripad of Kattumadam. She inherited from him a great capacity for silence. She was like one of the swamps that form themselves during the Malabar monsoons, with hard crusts concealing the slush and its carnivorous hunger that draws in with splashy sounds every living creature that comes its way. I used to call her Valiamma, Big Mother, and ask her questions, only out of a habit of asking questions, but she seldom gave any answer.

Hers was a hard face, a shut safe of iron, that locked in all the bitterness of her unhappy life, of which the others gave me only sketchy details with some reluctance. It was not seemly for the child of an orthodox family to ask questions of importance and the elders expressed their resentment. I learned that Valiamma had been married to a handsome scholar who gave her a son and soon afterwards fell out of favour with her uncle, who threw him out one day asking him never to return.

The Nairs, particularly the males, were coarse when their ire was aroused. The young Brahmin walked away not daring even to glance back once at his wife and son. The young woman was, within weeks, married off to her father's nephew who was not sensitive or gentle like the one who had gone away. For days she waited at the fence under the lime trees hoping to see her first husband pass that way but he did not.

Valiamma never used to talk to her son. She was shy and kept herself away from the men's quarters. Except on his birthday she did not even serve food to her son, and she seemed ill at ease in his company. Perhaps she felt that she had betrayed him by marrying for a second time, and one who was so different from his father. Her son's eyes pierced her heart and unsettled all the vague feelings of guilt and bitterness. But she need not have worried at all, for her son was a child of light, easygoing and unruffled. There were no dark sewers running beneath the streets of his mind.

He grew up learning English and Sanskrit, a spiritual child to Varahamihira and Plato. The greatest of thinkers he regarded as his parents. It was not important for him that he came from the loins of a lesser being, an effeminate scholar who charmed his mother with his rosy skin and sweet smile. He built for himself a library with grilled walls and began to collect books. He made friends with Vallathole who was at that time the rising star of the Malayali literary firmament and together they went around discussing their raw philosophy and captivating the listeners. He joined the Theosophical Movement. Flamboyant people like the late Sardar K.M. Panikkar, James Cousins and Miss Lightfoot, the Australian danseuse became his friends. The Nalapat House hummed with intense and intellectual talk. And, floating above the hum like a heavy-winged bird was Vallathole's full-throated laughter. Vallathole had become deaf, and he did not know how to modulate his voice. His sentences flowed, as he spoke, with the gush of rivers blind to their destination, his happy voice, tremolo, at times trembling in mid-air....

My grand uncle became famous after he wrote the elegy that was entitled Kannuneerthulli, the translation of which was printed at a press in Great Britain. Its sales were not good. Between Vallathole and my grand uncle tension began to grow, and perhaps a touch of professional jealousy. Grand uncle was jealous of the ease and felicity revealed in Vallathole's writings, and Vallathole was probably jealous of his friend's capacity to think in depth. My grand uncle's first wife had died in child-

birth, shattering his happiness. It took him nearly fifteen years to get over her death. When he married for a second time he knew well that it was not like his first marriage, a love-match. The Malayali readers who had wept copiously while reading his famous elegy were dismayed to hear of his second marriage. They would have liked him to go to bed with a ghost every night. I remember a young lady called Sarada who was a house-guest for two months telling my mother that she could never never forgive Nalapat Narayana Menon for marrying again.

When grand uncle's mother died of cancer, he was lying ill in a room a few yards away with large diabetic carbuncles all over his body. He could not wear clothes at all. He lay covered by a white sheet that showed blood-stains and the yellow of some ointment. Once when my grand-aunt was washing him I looked in and saw with horror the red hollow boils on his chest. They looked like star-rubies. He was groaning with pain when she swabbed the hollows with boric lotion. His mother had complained of a stomachache and had asked for a tablet of Aspirin although she had never in her life touched an Allopathic drug. What is wrong, asked my grandmother, growing anxious.

Valiamma was one who never showed to the world anything as private as pain. She had lost a lot of weight and looked pale in the face. Then there was some bleeding, and the doctor told the others that it was probably cancer. He put her on Morphine so that she lay peaceful while her scalp began to emanate a sweet mouldy smell and white lice began to crawl about in her hair. When she died after a fortnight and was carried out, wrapped in linen, towards the southern yard my grand uncle sat up on the bed and wept like a baby. It was the first time that he was displaying his love for his mother. After a few minutes when the pyre was lit by other hands he collapsed once again on the bed.

Valiamma had not stepped out of the Nalapat House for over thirty years except to go to the privy that was a furlong

away and to the pond for her baths. I cried too when I saw her frail body being removed. She had had long wavy hair touching her calves, incredibly soft, silken and touched with grey. Her poor poor hair, I whispered, while the flames grew large and devoured her. My father took me back to Calcutta on the next day, feeling that I had had enough of illnesses and deaths and required a change.

10

She was half-crazed with love and hardly noticed me

My brother and I, with the help and co-operation of our friends began a theatre movement, calling our group the Vannery Children's Dramatic Society, and staged each of our productions on the multi-levelled patio of the Nalapat House, hiring gaudy curtains, costumes and the stage-hands from the nearest town.

The prominent citizens sat in the first three rows. Behind them on the hired school benches sat our relatives, and in the courtyard, on the sand rested the pittites who clapped their hands and roared in enthusiasm when emotions touched their highest peaks. The village had no electricity in those days. The footlights were hurricane lamps, covered according to changing moods, with coloured cellophane.

The first play we staged was a Malayalam adaptation of a chapter from Victor Hugo's classic *Les Miserables*, the one that described Jean Valjean's visit to the house of Tennardierre to meet the little orphan Cossette. I was Eponyne, the haughty daughter of the Tennardierres. When I first entered the stage and saw the footlights glimmer palely like the stars of a wintry morning and the upturned faces, I shed all wraps of shyness and began to sing in a clear, cool voice.

Our team succeeded in wringing out tears from the stony hearts of the chieftains who sat in the front row. The pittites sobbed their hearts out when Jean Valjean brought an expensive doll for the orphan. They cried out of joy. After that the

applause and the magic of the footlights haunted us. We had to go on acting to hear more and more of the applause.

My best performance was in the role of the Moghul queen Nurjehan and my best scene the one in which she was shown visiting the battleground after the gory war was over. A card-board elephant was stuck to a stool on which I sat with my right leg thrown over the cutout. My crown of board and tinsel was heavy and the posture was uncomfortable. But there was such a silence in the auditorium that it seemed to us then that they had forgotten the fact that a kidlet was playing the queen's role. I felt intoxicated with the warmth of their response. My brother later congratulated himself for having insisted on giving the role to me against the wishes of other members who had felt that a prettier girl would be more suitable. The prettier one got the part of Mumtaz Mahal, the wife of Prince Khurram, and she did display creditable prettiness.

In a year's time we had staged the Malayalam translations of all Dvijendralal Roy-plays and had got on to Kalidas's *Sakuntalam* and Bhasha's *Swapnavasavadattam*. My brother as Rana Pratap was a hammy treat. He trod the boards like a seasoned thespian, wearing crowns and glittering achkans with swords tucked into his sash and spoke emphatically of dying for his land. Every drop of my blood I shall spill to protect you, oh my dear country, he roared, and the footlights cast a wild red glow over the sequins of his dress. A lunate aura circled his brow. From the green room's chaos, the make-up men beat the drums, softly, moodily, to warn the audience of impending death....

My grandmother was worried about the duskiness of my skin and rubbed raw turmeric on Tuesdays and Fridays all over my body before the oilbath. She oiled my hair and washed it carefully with a viscid shampoo made out of the tender lea-ves of the hibiscus. It was fashionable then to have curly hair and naturally she took pride in showing it off to our relatives who praised my thick tresses but mumbled unkind things about my colour. I remember going to our cook in the afternoon and asking him secretly if I were really ugly. He had laughed loud

exclaiming "No, no, not at all. In fact I feel that you may become, in ten years' time, a real beauty".

When I was nine, my father, coming home on leave, found me to have become too rustic for his liking and immediately admitted me into a boarding school run by the Roman Catholic nuns. I went with him in a taxi, carrying with me a long black box shaped like a child's coffin in which my grandmother had packed my meagre belongings: four white frocks made of mill-khaddar, four old-fashioned knickers and two towels. My grandmother did not know at that time of the function of a petticoat or a chemise. I was ignorant too of city-fashions.

My father introduced me first to the Mother Superior who wore round her waist not only a rosary with a silver cross but a tiny pair of scissors which was perhaps to snip off little hairs that might grow on her scalp. All the nuns had, under their black veils, clean-shaven scalps that shone pink in the dim lights of their dormitories while they undressed for the night.

When my father introduced me to the Boarding sister, Sister Philomene, she embraced me with her plump arms and whispered, don't worry my dear, I am here to look after you....She was about fifty and had on her pale chin two scraggly hairs. Her round face was serene and her smile tender. Tears came to my eyes out of gratitude. When my father got into the car and vanished round the corner I followed Sister Philomene to the Boarding house which was half a furlong away.

A twelve-year-old girl in a striped frock was standing beside the gate looking out. Come, Raji, called out Sister Philomene, meet another newcomer, Kamala....Raji looked as if she had cried a lot. Her eyes were red and held only misery and mistrust. But she accompanied us to the Boarding. It was a circular structure, two-storeyed, with a garden where instead of flowers grew only tapioca and a well at the back shaded by a gauva tree.

The garden gate which was kept locked always, faced the road and a hotel which sold among other things ice-cream which the girls bought, stealthily climbing over the wall in the dark. Sister Philomene had another nun to assist her in her

duties. This was an unpleasant person who thought it her mission in life to catch the children guilty of sins both of omission and of commission and to take them to the Mother Superior for appropriate punishment. Her mouth watered and her currant-like eyes glistened when anyone was found dozing during the study-hour or talking to her neighbour. The children hated her.

When I first walked in, the Anglo-Indian girls seated in the hall stopped their sewing and began to sing: "She had nothing under when she came", and I wondered why they laughed looking at me. Then an older girl got up and came towards me. I am Sarada Menon, she said, I am going to be your roommate.

She took me to the northern room on the ground floor which had an adjacent dressing-room and a jasmine-vine growing beside the window. I was given the widest bed, the one beside the window. There were four beds in the room. Raji was to occupy the one next to mine. Besides the three of us, there was a thin fourteen-year-old called Meenakshi who looked like an El Greco painting. Sarada was the prettiest and being the oldest became our guardian willingly. She shared with us the sweets that she had brought from home. Raji refused to eat anything. What is the use being homesick, asked Sarada. We have to stick it out here until the December vacation.

Sarada was one who had grown up in Singapore. She had stylishly cut dresses which reached only to her knees revealing the slight bandiness of her calves, which only made the legs more arresting. She was reserved, talking only to her teachers and to her room-mates. A second-class boarder from Goa fell in love with her and kept pestering her with tender notes and tenderer glances until Sarada lost her temper and shouted at her.

The lesbian admirer came into our room once when Sarada was away taking a bath and kissed her pillowcase and her undies hanging out to dry in the dressing room. I lay on my bed watching this performance but she was half-crazed with love, and hardly noticed me.

11

The girls in boarding school came from a very different background

My room-mate Raji was the only daughter of a wealthy medical practitioner and a pampered child. It was for some lessons in discipline that she was sent by her parents to the boarding school. But she believed in teaching the nuns a lesson and somehow punishing them for 'their holier than thou' attitude.

The assistant boarding mistress scolded Raji whenever an opportunity presented itself, which was as often as twice a day. Raji sulked nearly all the time and opened her mouth only to mutter profanities about the stern nun. I wish she dies, said Raji one day, before she took up her Bible for the nightly prayer.

My room mates nicknamed me Ulba and began to pamper me with little gifts of sweets and ice-cream. They wanted me to get for myself better clothes and forced me to write to my father in Calcutta asking for a silk frock for my tenth birthday.

They did not know how it hurt my pride to do such a thing. I knew well that I would fall in my father's esteem by revealing desire for fancy clothes. They came from a background very different from mine. They thought it normal for children to wear good clothes and tie satin ribbons in their hair. They wanted to see me look as pretty as their sisters and cousins who were of my age.

My grandmother used to send someone or other once in two

months to bring me to Nalapat for a week-end. When after one of those short stays I left home, my escort was my grand uncle's youngest brother-in-law. My grandmother wanted him to get for me from the city-bazaar some cloth for the frock which I was to wear for my birthday.

My grandmother could hardly afford to buy me silks. The sum she gave him must have been meagre, for the uncle told the shop's salesman that he wished to be shown some inexpensive cloth, something coloured but not too fancy. The salesman pulled down on the counter, bales and bales of beautiful poplins with prints of flowers and animals.

Is there nothing cheaper, asked my uncle in a loud, carrying voice and the people walking along the road, slowed down to see what was going on. I want for this child something really cheap, shouted the uncle. I felt humiliated. I wanted like Sita to disappear into the bowels of the earth. Finally some printed mill-khaddar was brought out which suited our pockets. A blue on white design which cost us two and a half rupees.

When it was shown to my room-mates they hated its coarseness. Poor little Ulba, they said. But I comforted them by telling them that the frock from Calcutta would anyway be reaching me before the birthday. On the eve of my birthday they took me out for shopping, saying that Sarada needed to get some gift for her cousin Satyavati.

Then to my utter amazement I saw the loveliest fabrics laid out on the counters, and my eyes took in with a wild greed the flamboyance of the colours and the gleam of the midday sun on the silks and taffettas.

If you were Satyavati which would you choose for a dress, asked Sarada. After a long pause during which I touched the softness and the cool of the silks, I spoke : this one in heliotrope of course. It had clusters of small white flowers. Sarada bought it, and, then exhausted by the day's rounds, we returned to the school. When I woke up on my tenth birthday my room-mates sang the Happy Birthday song to me and presented me with the beautiful cloth I had chosen for Satyavati. Then the tears came,

and I went hiding my face in Sarada's hair. You will look so pretty in this violet-coloured frock, said Meenakshi.

The Mother Superior had sent for me, and the message frightened me, because I had arranged for some ice-cream to be smuggled into the school over the wall that evening. But when I went up to her room, she only handed me a packet of embroidered hand-kerchiefs and wished me many happy returns of the day.

The Calcutta-frock arrived a month late and as it was chosen by my busy father's secretary it turned out to be terribly oversized. I put it away in my back box under the towels and the bed-sheets.

The assistant boarding-mistress was harsh with Raji when she fell ill. She accused Raji of malingering and plotting to evade the first term's tests. Raji was so upset by the lecture that she cried and began to vomit on to the floor. I was in tears too. I was extremely fond of Raji who was disdainful towards all but very kind to me, and I felt afraid that she was going to die. She had looked yellow and wan for a week. She had taken no food at all for several hours. I had coaxed her to drink some buttermilk but even that she had thrown up.

Don't worry, Ulba, said Raji, I am going to be well as soon as I get out of this purgatory. That evening Raji's parents came to take her away. Her father diagnosed the illness as Jaundice. I helped her pack her things. Won't you return when you get cured, I kept asking her. No I will not return to this place, said Raji. But I have written down on the walls of the lavatories some messages for the nuns. After I leave, please go and read them. But do not tell anyone that I wrote the stuff....

After Raji had left, I suddenly became lonely. She was the only one who liked to whisper in bed at night after the ten o' clock's silence-bell had struck. Both Sarada and Meenakshi were obsessed with their study. They thought it a waste of time chatting about the vagaries of the nuns. Raji had once dragged me to a windowsill at night and had helped me climb the ledge to peep into the nuns' dormitories. She found the sight of their bald heads very amusing. We used to giggle endlessly whenever that particular memory came up.

I read the message Raji had scribbled with charcoal on the privy walls. It said that the assistant boarding-mistress was an ape and that instead of brains her head contained only some dung and dog-shit. Raji also wrote that all the nuns were finally to meet with a gory end, for they could not, however much they tried, hood wink the all-seeing God....

12

Homely Annie gets handsome young lover !

On holidays there were three study sessions for the boarders. One hour in the morning, two hours in the afternoon and one hour between seven and eight in the evening after supper. All that was expected of the students was total silence.

The nun in charge of the session sat sewing but slyly watched the girls who dared to raise their eyes from the books to look at one another. On fortunate days we had the mild Sister Thecla who never bothered about what was going on, but read her book or mended old veils, without once looking up from her work.

The girl who sat near me one day at study was fifteen and was called Annie. She kept reading and re-reading a letter and when she saw me glance at her, she whispered that she wanted me to read the letter that she had received from a boy. A rich and handsome boy, who was very fair and tall. He is always pestering me with such letters, Annie said, frowning.

I read with amazement that the boy considered Annie the most beautiful girl in the world and that he wanted not only to hold her in his arms, but also to kiss her passionately on her full lips. Do not be so cruel to me, sweet Annie, the lover had written, give me a chance to prove my love for you.... What do you think of this, asked Annie. Isn't he audacious ? I nodded.

I studied Annie's face with a new interest. She looked very plain to me. She was thin and her skin was swarthy and blotched with acne. Her teeth were in bad shape. Her hair was oily

and hung in two scraggy plaits. This was the girl whom the rich boy adored so blindly. I felt sorry for the boy. But all I said was that she ought to try hard and love him back in return. Do you believe in love, asked Annie and without letting me reply, she shrugged her shoulders and said with a smile, after all you are only a little child, how can you be expected to know what love means....

When I told Sarada about Annie's lover she grew angry. You must not talk to that horrible creature again, she said. During study, sit close to me or near Meenakshi. Don't mix with riff-raff. But Annie did not leave me alone even for a day. She used to call me to the bath-house in the afternoon on Sundays only to lean against the wall and talk to me about her lover. She showed me yet another letter in which he had progressed in his ardour to such an extent, that he wrote about the round smooth breasts of Annie which he was dying to touch. I was shocked. Didn't I tell you, asked Annie, didn't I tell you he was a worthless lecher ? He does not love me. He only wants my body....

And, I glanced at Annie's breasts which were flat and unappetising. Ask him not to write again, I said. Tell him that you will report him to the Mother Superior.

One day Annie called me aside and showed me a bruise on her upper lip. He bit me, she said, and bewildered, I asked, who bit you ? That one, the rich boy who loves me, said Annie in a whisper; he climbed over the wall and came to my bed last night when all of you were asleep. This is awful, I said, you must report to the Mother Superior at once. One day he will kill you. Annie gave an enigmatic smile. You are too young to know what love means, she said, but you are the only one I can trust with a secret....

During the third term, Annie was expelled from the boarding school and the nuns gave out no valid reasons. She left early in the morning before any of us had woken up, carrying with her all her books and clothes. An uncle had come in the night to take Annie away.

Later, Sarada told me that she was living in a world of make-believe and that all the loveletters were found to be in her own handwriting. Meenakshi laughed, but I felt some kind of loyalty towards Annie and kept silent. Good riddance, said Sarada, combing her long hair, she was a bad influence on our little Ulba.

There were three kinds of boarders in the convent. The first class boarders, who were given a breakfast of cereal, eggs and toast, meat at lunch-time, snacks at tea and pudding after supper; the second class girls, who had only cereal at breakfast, rice and fish curry at lunch and no pudding at supper ; the third class boarders, who got only a gruel made of maize in the morning, rice at lunch and gruel again at night. Worse off than even the third class boarder were the orphans who cleaned the lavatories, swept the droppings of the turkeys and the dead leaves from the kitchen yard, chopped firewood, helped in the kitchen and ate only two meals of gruel a day.

They wore white and exuded the smell of rancid coconut oil which they had applied to their dusty hair. The orphans were nearly all the time busy filling up the wooden tubs in the many bathrooms meant for the boarders and the nuns. This tired them out so much that they hated drawing water from the well for their own baths. They therefore bathed only once a week.

The oldest orphan was a 70-year-old lady called Rocky Mariam who went to the bazaar with baskets to buy the provisions for the cuisine-house. Whenever she came on the scene the turkeys chased her, making loud friendly sounds, and she spoke to them in Malayalam in a quavering voice full of affection. They are calling me Ammachi (Mother) said the old lady one day, pointing to the gawky birds. The cook laughed, and her laughter resembled the cackle of birds. She was called Felicitas and was respected by all the orphans. It was within her power to give them an extra ladle of gruel if they pleased her. She was weedy and emaciated. Her teeth looked like rusty nails, being pointed, and discoloured by the betel and tobacco she chewed the whole day long.

After each vacation each of us brought from our homes

sweets and fruits and banana-chips. Once my grandmother had sent with me a bunch of ripe yellow bananas which disappeared from our dressing room at night. It was obvious that someone very hungry had eaten them, creeping into our room while we were asleep, for we found the peels lying outside the window.

I did not want anyone to know of this petty theft but the assistant boarding-mistress somehow got wind of it and decided to make a huge fuss. After the prayer she told the children that St. Anthony was going to turn the culprit insane within three days. For two days we went around looking for signs of lunacy in others' faces.

Finally, at dusk, a terrified girl went up to the plaster statue of St. Anthony in the chapel and began to sob hysterically. The nuns prayed to the saint and begged him to spare the young girl in view of her tender age. She was a plump girl, fond of eating and apparently the convent's niggardly rations did not satisfy her hunger. She was let off with a gloomy warning from the Mother Superior. She developed convulsions soon after and went home for good.

The obsession with sin destroyed the minds of several girls who were at the beginning of their adolescence, normal and easygoing. If there was a dearth of sin, sin at any cost had to be manufactured, because forgiving the sinners was a therapeutic exercise, popular with the rabidly virtuous.

13

The nuns used to censor the letters we wrote

When I fell ill at the boarding and later developed a rash, the nuns decided to send me home. They chose a middle-aged spinster named Ponnamma to be my escort. Sarada powdered my face, trying to conceal the pink spots, and tied up my hair in a pony-tail with a broad yellow ribbon. Ponnamma took me by bus, and all through the journey she kept explaining to the other passengers that the rash was not measles but only a mild allergy that I picked up after eating shell-fish. The bus-conductor was friendly towards us and kept calling Ponnamma "sister" although he was meeting her for the first time.

When I reached Nalapat my grandmother rose in surprise to greet me. It is only measles, said Ponnamma. Your brother is already here, said my grandmother, he has measles too, he arrived from his hostel yesterday. She took me up to the middle room where my brother Mohandas was lying in bed reading H.G. Wells. His face seemed mottled with the red rash. You have come too, he said giving me a smile. It was the usual thing for us to fall ill at the same time. As children in Calcutta, fever attacked us only simultaneously so that we enjoyed the spell of rest, painting pictures together, seated on our sick bed and sticking stamps in our albums. If ever I had a personal hero in my childhood it was my brother, who came out first in every class and in every school he went to, and bagged all the prizes. He could draw fine caricatures of the national leaders and write humourous articles. Whenever he made a speech his

voice could, with its fine modulations, control his audience, and swing them into his way of thought. He would have made an excellent politician, but he turned to medicine and later became a successful surgeon....

I used to tell my brother that I would take up law. I had heard that lawyers made enormous amounts of money and lived in style, keeping more than three cars and a pack of servants. I loved opulence and luxury. Perhaps this was the reason for my choosing the roles of queens and princesses whenever we decided to stage a play. I liked the bewitchment of gems, silks and perfumes. In all my day-dreams. I saw myself as a bejewelled empress who controlled the destinies of her countrymen. Some kind of a Noor Jehan. I hated to see myself as I really was, in mirrors which threw back at me the pathetic contours of my thin body and the plain face with the protruding teeth.

When we were separated, my brother and I, I felt alone and lost, for between us even in the silence we shared was a pure kind of communication, an interminable dialogue that went on and on like that of the wind with the earth or of the sun with the trees. Each drew sustenance from the other's unspoken support. I wrote two letters to my brother but they were stilted and dull and he did not care to reply. The nuns used to censor the letters we wrote before they were sent for mailing. They compelled us to write that we were very happy at the boarding and that every day we prayed to God for the well-being of our relatives. My brother must have thought that I had lost my mind, reading my idiotic letters. He must have wondered what had happened to my social conscience, my political sense and my curiosity.

In the beginning when I was miserable I had with the help of a day-scholar posted an appeal to my father begging him to rescue me from what I considered to be hell. I hated the meaty smell of the vegetable-curry and the viscid soups. I hated the cold water baths which gave me frequent cramps and a persistent ache in my calves. My father did not reply to that weepy letter. By the time the year was out I had begun to like my room-mates, and the boarding ceased to resemble hell.

Then my father took me back to Calcutta to live with the family. Our family had increased to six by then. I had a younger brother and a baby-sister. We lived in an old yellow house at Lansdowne Road which had large bedrooms with high ceilings and a verandah shaded by curtains made of khus. There was a narrow garden separating the house from the pavement where we grew cactus and crotons. At the back was the kitchen-house, consisting of a large dark kitchen, a coal-shed and an attic-room where the cook and his wife, our ayah, slept at night. The servant's privy was some yards away, in the North-West corner. It was said to be haunted by the ghost of a pregnant girl who had committed suicide hanging herself from its ceiling. At night the servants were afraid to go there.

The old Chaprassi who slept in the coal-shed urinated in the corner of his den and we could smell it from the kitchen. He drank arrack every evening and smoked beedis sitting on his charpoy in the dark. There was a naked bulb hanging on a wire in his room but he hated to switch it on. I don't like to waste your father's money, he told me one day. When I was starving in far-away Kunnamkulam your father saved me from penury and brought me here. Now I send home enough money to educate my boy and to keep my girls well-clothed. Your father is a king.

Next to God, I revere him most in this world. Do you understand ? And, sitting near him on his charpoy, I nodded. He was well over sixty and looked worn-out. But he worked during the day at my father's office, preparing frothy tea for the clerks. In the evenings he was our Chaprassi and opened the door to our visitors with a greeting in English and a cultured grin. He had worked for our relatives, Mr. and Mrs. K. N. Menon, the parents of Aubrey Menon, for a year and had learned how to please the Westernised Indians.

One day he got from his son a letter stating that his old wife was dying. The old man wrung out his large nose and told my mother that he wanted to send a hundred rupees immediately to meet the expenses of the funeral. Money was dispatched by telegraphic money order in an hour's time. The

would-be-widower sat on his charpoy talking about his wife in the past tense, recounting her vanished beauty and her kindliness.

After a week the wife recovered from the ailment and wrote a letter to thank him for the money. He was in a rage. That good-for-nothing hag, he shouted, when he had the letter read out to him, she cheated me of a neat hundred ! If she decides to die after a few months how will I be able to raise another hundred for the funeral ? He went out and drank a lot of arrack that evening to calm himself down. Why didn't she die at the proper time, he asked me, and when I smiled at him he nodded his head and muttered, it is God's will....

14

"I wanted to marry a rich man . . .to be a snob"

From the rectangular balcony of our house we could see across the road and into the garden of the wealthy lady who had once figured in the famous *Bhowal Sanyasi* case. Her playboy of a husband had died at a hill station when he was very young.

But one day after several years a *sanyasi* went up to the family and declared that he was none other than the one who was supposed to have died.

The pall-bearers had left him on the lit pyre and run away to escape from a sudden downpour that ultimately put out the fire and brought him back to consciousness. He was taken away by a *sanyasi* to an ashram and nursed back to health. He too became one of the sect but later, much later, he decided to come back to Calcutta to claim his share of the family's property. His wife refused to acknowledge him as her lost husband. She did not see any similarity in the features of the corpulent *sanyasi* and called him a mere impostor. The *sanyasi* filed a suit and waited patiently for the court's verdict but before he could benefit from its favourable judgment he fell ill and died.

The widow, wearing plain white, flitted about like an aging Snow White in the garden where roses of several colours grew. There was a rookery, a pond with a wide ledge where she sat in the evenings watching the water and a little gnarled tree bearing yellow flowers. The birds were always very noisy in her garden but she seldom spoke to anyone or ever went out of the house.

Her brother stayed with her. He used to walk with long strides in the garden, and he too seemed silent, thoughtful. It was as if the two of them knew that their minds were bruised with doubts which could never be swept away.

To the left of our house lived a family that entertained lavishly and hobnobbed with the international bigwigs. They believed strongly in Moral Rearmament. Members of the movement visiting India invariably came to Calcutta and stayed for a while with them. The lady of the house sat in the mornings near the dining table, fat and contented, checking the kitchen accounts with her cook and cutting up the vegetables for the salads. Her youngest son came to our house in the evenings to play shuttle-cock with us in the space between our dining hall and the kitchen-house.

He was obese and left-handed. He used to bore us with details of the many matches he had won at his school. He showed us as evidence a letter he was going to post to the Tollygunge Club inviting the players over for a tournament. He became a member of the Casma Players Badminton Club which my brother and I had started along with four of our friends. He pestered us to make him our captain, but we decided to wait until the Tollygunge players replied to his letter before honouring him. They did not reply to his letter.

He was always in need of money. Have you got four annas to lend me, he would ask, nosediving down from the corrugated roof of our kitchen adjoining theirs, I need it urgently...My mother had an old tin where she stored buttons for my father's shirts and buckles. I would rummage among the buttons and find for my friend a few coins. The urgent need was nearly always an ice-cream. The ice-cream vendors used to cycle along the roads carrying their yellow boxes and shouting musically, Ice-cream Magnolia, Ice-cream Magnolia.

To the right of our house in an old ramshackle mansion, showing only its profile to the street, lived the Zamindars of Madhupore who had a daughter of my age named Shantu. She had a mole on her cheek of which she spoke with great pride. It is a beauty spot, she said. Only one in million will get born with a beauty spot on the cheek...I was sick with envy. I had

by then begun to wear glasses to correct myopia. I would rather die than wear glasses, said Shantu. She used to come every evening to my house to take lessons in Manipuri dance from my teacher, Sjt. Brajabashi.

One day, while my parents were out, she took me to her house where in the dim lit halls and corridors I saw with fascinated eyes statuettes of jade and amber, rust-brown carpets woven in Persia and gossamer drapes of yellowing lace. We went up the staircase and entered a darker domain, a bedroom, where on a fourposter an old man lay huddled beneath silk quilts. His face was narrow like a mountain goat's. Dadoo, this is my friend, Kamala, said Shantu. The old man who was her grandfather lifted his head and chortled. His vacant eyes and the laughing mouth frightened me. I was soaked in perspiration when I finally got away from his presence.

But afterwards, standing on my terrace, reaching out to touch the ripe jamun sprinkling the treetop with ivory, I prayed to God to make me rich enough to live in an old mansion full of statuettes and silver and old lace.

I wanted to marry a rich man, a zamindar, and live on in the city of Calcutta. Above all I wished to be a snob.

15

We were subjected to subtle sadism of several kinds

My father had admitted me to a school near our house which had at one time a college attached to it. A revolutionary student had made an unsuccessful attempt to shoot dead the British Governor, and this closed down the college.

Its vast rooms were converted into bedrooms for the teachers and into libraries. Those of the Calcutta elite who had been unwittingly drawn into the grip of Gandhism sent their children to that school instead of admitting them into the anglicized Loretto House.

Our principal was an old spinster who formed strong likes and dislikes on the basis of physical allure and the lack of it. She used to whisper often to a classmate of mine that she ought not to read late into the night and ruin her health and beauty. Nearly all the teachers were old maids, turned sour with rejection, and so we were subjected to subtle sadism of several kinds.

I had at that time only one reliable friend, a stout girl named Romola, who was prepared to like even the most snobbish and the most malevolent. Clowning came easy to her and the naivete of her reactions to any situation was moving. Not one girl hated her, although all made fun of her.

The most snobbish were the West Bengali rich who spoke a faster dialect and kept themselves aloof. They talked endlessly of Sarat Babu's novels and hummed tunes from Rabindra San-

geet. They had their lunches brought to the school by their servants in tiffin carriers of gleaming brass, which when spread out on the class desks, revealed fish in a red gluey gravy, rice, fried prawns and sweets made from cream.

If any of us who belonged to the group of dry-lunchers walked past the rooms while their lunch was going on, they stopped their munching and tried to hide their plates. They believed genuinely that we were envious of them and that we were capable of making them fall ill, merely by glancing at their food with our greedy eyes. Their discomfiture amused us a great deal because their food always looked to us sticky and unclean. Our cheese sandwiches, in comparison seemed clean and wholesome.

Then there were the orthodox Tamils who preferred to hide behind the staircases and the bathrooms to eat the curds and rice which they had brought from their homes, a sticky mixture sprinkled with green chillies and lime, lovingly prepared by their mothers or widowed grandmothers. This was always brought in round containers dented and tarnished with age. The Tamils had an inferiority complex which rose basically from this meagre diet. They kept themselves away from the others, and whispered to one another of M. L. Vasanta Kumari and M. S. Subbalakshmi. The Bengalis made faces at them and muttered "antra puntra antra puntra."

Our Maths teacher was a young woman with a perpetual scowl who wore a circular brooch at her waist to accentuate its slenderness. My benchmate Mamata fell in love with her and gazed at her with adoration while she took our class. Isn't she the prettiest person you have seen, Mamata used to ask me repeatedly. Mamata was weak in Maths and was often punished for not trying to learn its rudiments. At such moments she wore on her face a beatific expression as though she had become a saint or at least a Joan of Arc. When the teacher left Calcutta in search of a better job, Mamata grew listless and stopped coming to school.

Our English teacher was an Austrian refugee who had escaped from Nazi Germany. She was stout and redfaced. She

had the typical kinky hair of the Jews. She spoke English with a thick German accent, pronouncing stop as sthop. The girls used to giggle in her class and try to spatter ink on the four good dresses that she possessed. One day she caught a girl shaking her pen at her and was very upset. I am not rich like some of you, she said. I don't have many sets of clothes or the money to buy such things. Her eyes filled with tears while she said this. The guilty girl bowed her head in shame.

I had joined the school in the second term and so my father decided to let me have enough tutors to help me at home. One of them was a Syrian Christian spinster who was short and aggressive. A female Napoleon. I was terrified of her. One evening she stood at the window watching from behind the curtain a ball that was going on in our neighbour's house. Bejewelled women and men in black waltzed to slow music. There were potted palms near the pillars that had been borrowed from our garden in the afternoon. The scent of the cut flowers and the perfumes used by the ladies travelled to us, borne by the wind. I was quite fascinated.

Then I saw a dark man walking in, wearing not a suit but a bush shirt and he looked around with self-assurance and a smile. My teacher's hand on the curtain went tense all of a sudden. Don't look at him, the one in the bush shirt, she whispered, he is the most wicked man alive, I knew him well once upon a time... Her face had grown pale and she was panting with hate. How I hate him, she said.

I stared at the man who had caused such a storm in the mind of my teacher. He had an animal grace. He danced with light steps as though his shoes had in its soles, coiled springs. I like his looks, I told my teacher. She pulled me away in a hurry. You are not to look at that man. He has ruined the lives of several good girls. He has disgraced some of the best families in India, she said. How did he ruin the lives of the girls, I asked her. She was too distressed to reply.

After that incident, I thought often about the man. He was dark and of small build. Except for a leonine grace, he had nothing to attract the passing eye. The adjective "wicked"

compensated for his deficiencies. It was the first time that I had seen somebody who was notorious. I felt that I ought to meet him when I grew up, and perhaps become his mistress. All the wisdom of early adolescence told me that it would not do to marry a wicked man. Being a mistress to him meant pain in a bearably moderate dose and plenty of chances to forgive the sweet sinner.

16

I prayed to the Sun God to give me a male child

After my maidservant married the cook and started to share his room above the kitchen, I used to sleep alone in the large bedroom facing the verandah. The house was old, with high ceilings, and fans hanging on long iron rods that squeaked while they moved.

I used to fear the dark and all the creatures nesting in it, like ghosts and malevolent spirits. Each night I went to bed with the light burning on, pretending to have read myself to sleep. But at about two or three in the morning I would wake to find the light switched off. My parents probably got up at night to switch off my light.

I used to lie awake hearing thin swishing sounds which sounded like the sighs of spooks. Next to my room was a hall where the previous tenant, who had only sublet the house to us, had stored all his things, a divan with heavy mattresses, cupboards locked and unlocked, hat stands, dressers and huge wooden chests which his father, a Captain in the Navy, had once brought from China.

I used to think that the old Captain's ghost was peeping from the low wall that separated my room from his hall. I thought of him as an old, bearded man, wearing a pirate's hat. In the day his room was not very frightening. My father had asked us never to go into the room or look into his almirahs, but when he was out, I'd open the shelves and take stock of the dead one's belongings.

We had at the back of the house, a spiral staircase which was used only by the servants and the boys belonging to our badminton club who liked to spiral upwards fast to churn up their insides. Once I tried it but stopped midway feeling that I was about to faint. I was rescued in time by my maidservant, who carried me up to the prayer room where my mother was lighting the brass lamps in front of Krishna.

My frock had large spots of blood on it. I felt the hot blood flowing onto my thighs and dripping down to the floor. I am ill, I am dying, I cried to my mother. Something has broken inside me and I am bleeding. My mother lifted my dress and said with a laugh, it is nothing to be worried about, it is what all girls get at twelve or thirteen... She asked me to change my dress and taught me to wear sanitary pads. She told me that the blood only showed that I was ready to be a mother.

The maidservant kept laughing as she watched me change my dress. What a simpleton this child is, she said. After three days of dampness, I was as good as new again. I felt happy to think that I too could be a mother. I wanted to get a child for myself as fast as I could. I had heard from my grandmother the story of Kunthi, the mother of Pandavas and had been impressed with her methods of getting good sons.

Kunthi had prayed to the Sun God to grant her a son and thus Karna, the beauteous one, was born, wearing on his ear-lobes kundals that shone like the sun. After bath, alone in my room, I bared my body to the sun and told the Sun God that he ought to give me a son too. Take all of me, I cried, take my swelling limbs, take my wavy tresses, take my round breasts with their diminutive nipples, take all of me and give me a son. No God came forward to claim me as his woman. But gradually I grew. One or two places sprouted hair. The smell of my perspiration changed. My father sent away the dancing master, saying that I was too old to dance.

At Chowringhee, there was a well-known dentist who had returned from Vienna with the latest knowledge in Orthodontia. He straightened my teeth with braces and told me at the last sitting, now you are a very pretty little girl. Nobody in our family ever liked to pay one another such compliments. So

when I heard the words, I blushed purple with happiness. From that day I began to pay more attention to my toilet. I brushed my hair regularly before going to bed and washed my face three times a day. If ever I discovered a pimple on my cheek, I tinted it pink with lipstick to make it a pretty pimple. I removed my glasses at the slightest provocation to expose my eyes which I thought were rather lovely.

All the heroines of Bengali novels were supposed to bear in their eyes a sadness which made them irresistible to their heroes. I too tried to look sad, but it was a difficult task, for there were so many things that made me burst into laughter, and the world seemed so young, so happy so full of promise !

At thirteen when I went home to Malabar for my summer vacation, I fell in love with a student-leader who had been jailed for his revolutionary activities. He did not reciprocate, for his only interest was politics. He had read the writing of all the famous political philosophers and could quote effortlessly from their books. He had eyes that rolled upwards showing only their whites whenever he grew excited. My grandaunt told me that he had serpent-eyes and that people with such eyes were never to be trusted. She must have deduced from my behaviour that I had become infatuated with his charm. I tried to spend as much time as I could get in his company, but he did not once touch my hand or show any particular fondness for me.

My grandmother had got a local tailor named Kumaran to make for me two long skirts of green and two pale pink blouses.

I had no jewellery at all. I thought that it was my austere way of dressing that ruined my first love and made it unrequited. Then I tried to wear flowers in my hair. But all he said was that I should, without wasting any more time, begin to read Marx and Engels.

17

One morning the Sanyasi had gone ...only the smell of opium remained

---

One morning, only an hour before our luuchtime, the door-bell rang. Our maidservant ushered in a mendicant, gnarled with age and covered with the red dust on the road. Our cook immediately shouted at him. Get out of the house, we do not want sanyasis here, walking into our rooms; if you want alms, stay at the gate and ask for money, whoever heard of beggars and fake sadhus ringing the doorbell and quietly walking in....!

The old man gave a toothless smile and deposited his bundle on the floor. I am no beggar, he said in Malayalam, I am from a respectable family in North Malabar, I have been a pilgrim for the past forty years and I have seen all the holy places of our country, Kasi, Rameshwaram, Haridwar, Puri, Kedarnath, Badrinath....

We asked the maidservant to bring him a glass of butter-milk immediately. My mother was called downstairs to meet the pilgrim. My name is Pathiyar, said the old guest. The cook stood by, grumbling, but none of us paid him any heed.

We were fascinated by the slow dialect of the sanyasi. He told my mother that he had been tired of all earthly pleasures while still in comfortable middle age and had walked out like the Buddha, one night, to seek his peace. Now I am eighty-eight, he said, and I am weary with travel. If you will allow me to rest here for a day I shall be strong enough to leave this city and go to Puri.

Yes, you may, I cried, knowing well that my mother was inclined to be hospitable. Don't tell me later that I did not warn you, muttered the cook. I know these types. They are fakes. The old man smiled at the words. Do not worry my son, he said. I shall never be a burden on any one.

After getting my father's permission we moved him into the alcove behind the stairs where he spread out his belongings. A conch, two black saligrams, a bell, an incense burner and a hookah made of a coconut shell. Is this hookah for a pooja, asked our sarcastic cook. The maidservant was annoyed with her husband's attitude. She was fascinated by the old man's tales. To find one in Calcutta with whom she could communicate in her native tongue, she thought a blessing.

Do read my palm she used to tell him. Sanyasis are supposed to be fortune-tellers. The old man said, caressing her plump fingers, that she was to exercise greater caution in dealing with someone who was very close to her. He is a serpent in disguise, said the sanyasi. He will one day deceive you. He is only after your gold chain and your earrings....Who is this viper that you are talking of, asked the girl. Need I tell you my child, said the old man with his forgiving grin.

He used to make her very neurotic with his gloomy predictions. At night in the room above the kitchen, she quarrelled bitterly with her new husband, doubting his love. Won't this old dog ever leave this house, asked the cook every morning while he served us breakfast.

A week went by, but the sanyasi was still with us. He was fast regaining strength and was in a happy mood all the time. He used to sing bawdy songs to me in the evenings after my return from school, but I understood little and liked not their meaning but their lilt.

One morning when my father was coming down the stairs at eight-thirty for his breakfast, the smell of the mendicant's *hookah* reached his nostrils. Is the old one still here, asked my father. Yes he is, my mother said weakly. Then ask him to leave today after his lunch. We can't possibly keep him for ever.

After father had left the old man called me aside. Your father wants me to leave. I have grown very fond of this family. He was unashamedly weeping. I too wept with him. The maidservant came on the scene and began to bawl. It was a horrible scene. Then my mother promised to plead with my father for the old man who did not seem to be in a state fit for travelling.

It was while the sanyasi was staying with us that I first recognized myself to be a Hindu. He was antagonistic towards our driver who was a Moslem. Moslems cannot be trusted, he used to tell me, puffing on his hookah. Why not, I asked him. I had, at that time, several friends who were Muslims. Our eye-specialist was a pleasant doctor named Ahmed who used to joke with me and make me laugh a lot. The driver Morfed was an affectionate man. Mark my words, said the old man, ominously, there will be a war very soon, and the Muslims will molest our Hindu girls and kill all our sons. I was aghast. The maidservant nearly swooned. This old man is a fake, said the cook. He is no saint if he can hate any community so terribly. Besides he smokes opium....

One morning before we woke up, the man had gone, taking with him the conch, the incense burner, the bell and the hookah. Only the smell of opium remained under the staircase. He has left slyly like a thief, said the cook. He has left like a God, he has vanished, said the maid. After school, coming home I had no longer any one to tell me of religion and its base activities.

It was the year 1947, the early part of it, and rioting had begun in Calcutta. There was a story going round at the school that the Hindus had come to seek out Aulad, the peon and kill him, but that one of the teachers had hidden him under her bed. I was to go to Dr. Ahmad on a Friday at five-thirty to have my eyes tested, but on Thursday his body was cut up by some Hindus and dumped into a dustbin. Off and on we would hear from the distance religious slogans shouted by the rioters who went about in processions at dusk, holding aloft their sticks and weapons.

The schools were closed and also the shops. We ate rice and dal at lunch and at supper, for there were no vegetables to be

had anywhere, and no meat. It was also impossible to go home to Malabar or even to communicate with my grandmother. The postal system broke down totally. Once we saw a lorry filled with laughing people, mostly Sikhs, carrying aloft the yellow body of an old woman impaled on a spear.

Instead of Morfed, a driver named Naresh, started to drive my father to his office. He was resourceful and clever. He had with him in the glove compartment a Moslem fez cap and a Hindu turban. When he had to go near Park Circus, a Muslim area, he donned the fez cap to fool the people. In the predominantly Hindu areas he walked with his turban. He used to bring for us secret gifts of a small pumpkin or a banana procured from behind the Park Circus Bazar.

Then we moved southwards to a smaller house at Lake Avenue. A week after we moved in, there was a loud cry at eight in the evening coming towards our house. The processionists were shouting Allahu Akbar in hoarse voices. The landlord, a doctor in his sixties, took out his rifle and alerted his grown-up son to watch at the gate for the rioters. My father, helpless with only a walking stick to protect himself with, walked up to the gate with them. The women huddled in a room upstairs, sobbing softly. I was too excited to sob. I sat on the stairs with the landlord's second son and discussed the Chinese methods of torture.

It was an anti-climax when the rioters were dispersed before they neared our street and we had to go home and fall asleep, thinking of bloodshed and religion....

18

Was every married adult a clown in bed, a circus performer ?

The Lake Avenue flat in Calcutta was small, with only two bedrooms, a compact sitting room, an open corridor at the back and the dining room, kitchen and pantry on the mezzanine floor.

On the first floor lived our landlord, his fat wife and two sons. We had at the entrance to our drawing-room four wide steps of imitation marble where we sat with our informal callers in the evening, gazing at the garden. The hedges were well-trimmed and the seasonal flowers were well-tended.

There was only one large cane chair in the garden which was nearly all the time occupied by the old landlord. He used to be handsome and elegant. He smoked a pipe every morning after his breakfast which he ate alone in his private room on the ground floor, adjacent to our corridor.

He was a loner. His wife used to get attacks of hysteria almost twice a month, during which she abused him in Bengali and kept asking him where he had hidden his British concubine. The sons used to walk away from the house in embarrassed silence and return hours later, when she had turned quiet. The doctor paid no heed to all her wailing and ranting. He sat on the white cane chair, smoking his pipe. On some days when he was away at his dispensary, the wife would accost the driver and coax him to tell her about her husband's mistress. You take him to her many times every week, you must know her address....

We did not have many visitors. There were only two couples who visited our house regularly. Mr. and Mrs. Panicker who were my parents' friends for several years and a younger couple, Mr. and Mrs. Kunhappa. Mrs. K. was exquisitely lovely and very fashion-conscious. When she appeared at our door one day wearing a charcoal grey sari with large polka dots and a necklace of leopard-claws, I was startled by her beauty.

She talked to me of the cucumber juice that she mixed with cream to apply over her face each afternoon to retain her porcelain-smooth complexion. She was frank with me and to my frank questions she gave frank answers although at that time I did not even believe all that I heard. I could not for a moment believe that all the dignified couples coming to my house to discuss politics and literature with my parents, could in the dark perform sexual acrobatics to get what my dear friend called the great orgasm. She made me laugh in disbelief. Was every married adult a clown in bed, a circus-performer ? I hate marriage, I told her. I hate to show myself naked to anyone....

During that period when I was fourteen my father arranged for me to have an art-tutor. He was twenty-nine, pale-complexioned and tall. He wore the loose clinging dress of the rich Bengalee. He taught me on the first day to draw Kala Lakshmi and he pronounced the Goddess's name as Kola Lokhi. You have a good hand, he said appreciatively. He came to teach me every Wednesday in the evening, and instead of asking the cook to serve him tea I brought the tray down to him laden with tea, idlis, vadas and steamed banana. He spoke with respect and it seemed to me that in his eyes I was an adult. While he touched up what I drew, I watched with fascination his pink earlobes and his serene mouth.

I bought a white sari with a red border, the type the Bengali peasants wore, and draped myself in it to conceal my boyish body. I was in such a hurry to grow up that it began to show in the way I brushed my hair whipping it as one would whip a snake to kill it and in the way I stared at myself in the mirror for long lost moments. My parents began to notice the change in me. I was dressing for the tuition, I was wearing a sari for

him and I was nearly tripping, coming down the stairs carrying the heavy tea tray. So one day the tuition was discontinued, my father telling my tutor that I needed all the time available to do well in the school-exams. He went away nodding in agreement.

After he left saying goodbye, I realised that I loved him. Lying on my narrow bed at night all I could think of was his face and his earlobes. What a fool I had been to have resisted the temptation to kiss his mouth. I wanted to go to Mrs. Kunhappa and seek her advice. But I was afraid that she might only laugh at my infatuation. I talked to a much younger friend, a school-mate, and without hesitation she put me on a bus that took me as far as the place where he worked. You must tell him what you feel for him, my friend had said helping me climb into the bus.

I was nervous and my blue school-tunic was clinging to my back soaked in perspiration. After I had got on to the bus I discovered that I had not enough money to return home. Fighting back my tears, I waited for the bus to stop and then jumped down. There was a courtyard which I had to cross before I could reach his room. A large square with one pockmarked statue of a God at its centre. By the time I reached the statue the rain began.

In Bengal, the rain falls suddenly, with no warning, like the hysterical tears of a woman who herself does not know why she must suddenly burst into tears. I was totally drenched in a minute. I tried unsuccessfully to bend my head beneath the God's face to protect it from the lash of the rain. I did not know the name of the God. His face was pitted with the rains of centuries but his mouth was startlingly beautiful, an unformed smile softening the outlines. For a moment or two I stood there hugging him and then I remembered the other mouth, the pink earlobes and all the hours of hungering, and ran into his room, throwing open the door noisily, rudely.

He was seated at his table with some yellowing files in front of him. He raised his eyes. Thumi ? He asked me in Bengali. You ? The rain swept the dust of the courtyard into his room. He rose from his chair and shut the door.

I clung to his shirt-front sobbing uncontrollably. You are wet, you must change your clothes, he mumbled. He pulled my tunic over my head and wrung the water out through the window. His fingers were warm on my skin. Then with a handtowel he dried my hair and put the tunic on my body again. And, without another word he took me by taxi to my house and shook my hand at the gate.

Aren't you coming in, I asked him. No, not today, he said. That was the last time I saw him. But off and on I remembered the tenderness with which he pulled aside my dress and dried my body.

Why did he not kiss me ? Why didn't he make love to me ? I asked my friend in school why my first adult meeting with him gave me only disappointment. You never told him you loved him, she said. It is only when a man knows that a girl loves him that he kisses her. You got such a golden chance to have a love affair and all you did was cry and make a fool of yourself...

19

Her voice was strange...it was easy for me to fall in love with her

One of my teachers invited me once for lunch to her little flat at Harish Mukherji Road. I was fond of her and could not refuse, although my father was not too pleased about sending me alone to a stranger's house.

When I reached the place, my teacher held my hands in her own large ones and said that her husband had taken ill suddenly in the morning and that there was no time to inform me of a change in the programme. But my son will take you out for lunch, she said.

Her son was eighteen and during other visits to their house, he had played on the piano for me. He was of medium height and had an aged face with deep lines on his forehead and a wide mouth.

I went with him to a place called Paletti's and sat down on the balcony at a wrought-iron table. The waiters who had seen me there several times lunching with my father and his friends, hovered around anxious to serve us. The lunch hour was yet to begin and the place was nearly empty. Beneath us a man wearing dark clothes strummed a guitar glancing at us now and then. My companion covered my hand with his. Do you recognize the tune, he asked. I felt all of a sudden poor. The cultural poverty of my home was appalling. Although my mother was a well-known poetess, there were few visitors who could talk earnestly about art or literature. My parents did not care for music either.

I was an awkward savage. It is Bach, he said. Then hiding my face with my hands, I burst into tears. What is wrong, he asked me. The guitarist stopped his song. Did I say something to upset you, Kamala, my escort asked me. I shook my head. Take your soup, he said, it is turning cold.

And, while eating our lunch, I told him that I lacked music in my life and grace. I couldn't live without music, he said. He lent me his checked handkerchief to wipe my face. You are red with crying, I don't know what my mother would think, seeing you like this, he said.

When I returned home I did not tell my mother what had happened. She never asked any questions. My father too was entirely without curiosity. They took us for granted and considered us mere puppets, moving our limbs according to the tugs they gave us. They did not stop for a moment to think that we had personalities that were developing independently, like sturdy shoots of the banyan growing out of crevices in the walls of ancient fortresses.

When my Austrian teacher returned home with her family, a Bengali lady came to teach us English. She had a long face and nervous hands that kept running up her shoulder to pat the folds of her sari while she taught us Dickens. Her voice was strange, fractured in the middle and I thought it beautiful. It was easy for me to fall in love with her, for I had at that time a need to squander, but there were no takers. I wrote a poem addressed to my teacher in which I likened her to a rose. I was a flower too and this odd attachment of a flower to another was tragic. When I went to her room for tea one afternoon, she told me that she had liked the poem. I felt myself blushing. I am going home to Malabar for a month, I told her. May I write you a letter ?

Then my mother fell ill with typhoid. For a month her homeopath treated her and finally, when she became unconscious, Dr. Denham White was called to save her life. She was in a coma for a month. After school I used to go into the room to see her lie there emaciated and still as a corpse. My father could not stand the mental strain and he fell ill too. We had to put him in the drawing room as the third bedroom was

to be for the little child, my young sister. There was no Chloromycetine at that time to mitigate the harm typhoid did. All we could do was pray.

A friend of my parents, Janaki Amma, came one day with a suitcase and said that she was going to look after us until our parents recovered. She was a professor at The Brabourne College and was the most vivacious lady I had ever met. She had a tinkling laugh that attracted people. She was a magnetic person. What I recollect now of that period in our life more than even the sight of my mother lying in a coma or my father weeping like a child in sheer helplessness, is the smell of the Cuticura ointment that Miss Janaki used to rub into her hair before going to bed, pacing up and down in our room like a vibrant tigress. At times I used to rest my head on her bosom while she lay reading a book. Then she would begin to tease me about my English teacher. I want to see this grand lady, Janaki Amma said. I want to see this person who has cast such a spell on you. If you promise not to laugh I shall introduce her to you one day, I said. I cannot bear it if you laugh at her...

After my mother recovered and then my father, our house fell apart. My mother went home to Malabar for rest, carrying with her the little girl and my brothers. The elder brother went to Madras to study medicine. I was left alone with my father in Calcutta. Except for the two of us there were two servants and my father's younger brother. It was a period of intense loneliness for me. I had none to turn to for advice. Nobody bothered about me. I was free to do what I liked. All that was expected of me was that I should be home before six to be present when my father returned from his office. After taking a cup of tea, my father went out again for a walk beside the lakes or for a visit to any of his friends. The cook was busy with his friends in his dingy domain or busy making love to the maidservant. I felt myself to be an intruder in any room other than mine, where on a narrow bed among library books, I slept an uneasy sleep and woke hearing the clatter of spoons in the tea tray being carried by the cook to my father's room.

I lost interest in lessons. Every morning I told myself that

I must raise myself from the desolation of my life and escape, escape into another life and into another country. I was too diffident to venture out of my house alone. I stood beside our gate looking out, but the Lake Avenue in Calcutta is a lonely street and very few walk on it. Once or twice I saw a Chinaman on a bike with a large bundle and I called him in to see what he had to sell. I did not have any money to buy the nighties he spread out on the floor.

One day a seller of georgette sarees came in and talked for an hour about Sind. He said his name was Lokumal. The Sonpapriwala stood at our gates, smiling into my eyes. Don't you wish to eat sweets, he asked me in Bengali. I smiled and walked away. The neighbour's little daughter bought sheets of the crunchy sweet and ate them, sitting on the wall separating our house.

I am going to be a film star when I grow up, she told me. Her mother came to our house in the mornings to phone her lover when all of us were away. Our cook pretended not to understand English and stood by listening. He told me that she was an immoral woman. Do not talk to her if you meet her, he said. I have been asked to look after you and to protect you from danger, and I certainly shall not shirk my duty...

20

She lay near me holding my body close to hers

A friend of my family had warned me against associating with an 18-year-old girl residing in a College hostel, but when I went there with my mother, visiting her friends, I met her and felt instantly drawn towards her.

She stood at the doorway smiling at us, revealing a fetching gap between her front teeth and a dimple on her right cheek. She was tall and sturdy with a tense masculine grace. Hello, she said. I wanted to leave my mother and go into the young lady's room to make friends with her but I did not make any move to get up.

I did not wish to displease my mother's Professor-friends who had cautioned me against the girl who was different from others. When her eyes held mine captive in a trance, for a reason that I could not fathom, then I felt excited. Her skin was bronzed with the sun. She was like an animal that had exposed itself to the magnificent fury of the seasons, the suns, the rains and the harsh dry winds that sweep the sands of deserts....

When summer arrived a year after my mother had gone away to Malabar, my father decided to send me home for my vacation with a batch of Professors and students in a large compartment which had ten berths. The longest berth was assigned to me probably because I was the youngest and the smallest in stature.

As luck would have it, the girl I admired was with us, and when the lights were put out and the streaks of moonlight revealed the settled limbs of the sleepers she crept close to me and

asked me if she could sleep on the same berth with me; I hate the upper berth, she said. She looked around first to see if any one was awake. Then she lay near me holding my body close to hers. Her fingers traced the outlines of my mouth with a gentleness that I had never dreamt of finding. She kissed my lips then, and whispered, you are so sweet, so very sweet, I have never met anyone so sweet, my darling, my little darling....

It was the first kiss of its kind in my life. Perhaps my mother may have kissed me while I was an infant but after that none, not even my grandmother, had bothered to kiss me. I was unnerved. I could hardly breathe. She kept stroking my hair and kissing my face and my throat all through that night while sleep came to me in snatches and with fever. You are feverish, she said, before dawn, your mouth is hot.

In the morning, a friend of our family received us at the station and took us to his house which was adjacent to the big mansion owned by the Raja of Kollengode, whose son, a Major in the army had been a family friend while he was at Calcutta with special orderlies and all. Major Menon was amazed to see me grown up and teased me about the way I wore my sari. I was not accustomed to wearing sarees at that time but to travel south I had to wear clothes that hid my legs fully, for, the ladies at Nalapat were conservative, puritanical and orthodox.

Major Menon invited me and my gang to his place for lunch. My host's family was also invited. When all had left for the lunch my friend took me to the bathroom and coaxed me to to take a bath with her. Then she sprayed my body with the host's Cuticura and dressed me. Both of us felt rather giddy with joy like honeymooners.

When we reached Menon's house, the lunch, a traditional Malayali feast, was laid out in all its glory. There were usual dishes, the Kalan, the Sambar, the Olan, the Aviyal, the Elissery and the condiments of mango and lime. Major Menon charmed the adults with his wit and solicitude. He seemed grateful to me for having brought into his home a bunch of charming ladies, all unmarried. My friend and I ate little, and after the meal while the grown-ups chatted in the dark lounge, the two

of us wandered into the garden to walk under the shady wood-apples.

In the evening, we boarded the train again to go southwards. My friend forced me to eat the biriyani from her plate. When the professors had settled down for the night she came to me to kiss me goodnight. The berth was narrow this time and so she could not lie with me. But she bent over me kissing me passionately bringing to my nostrils the smell of the the engine's smoke and the strange sulphur of her perspiration. When I walked away from the railway station where a relative had been sent to fetch me home, she waved at me but I did not wave back. I wished to put her out of my life, to bring back the order that I had in my mind before I met her. But at Nalapat, lying in my late grandfather's room and staring at the tops of the old mango trees, it seemed to me that the older girl was haunting me with her voice and with her smile....

After a week a relative of mine who used to be a regular contributor to the magazine, jointly edited for years by my brother and myself, arrived on the scene. He was working in the Reserve Bank of India at Bombay. Once he had sent me a poem entitled 'A Bank Clerk's Dreams', which was very moving. Then again a story, slightly satirical, of a young man in Bombay called Prabhakar who did not know which direction to take, but let simple lust lead him.

He wrote well. When he came on leave and visited us at Nalapat he gazed at me in astonishment. I was in a striped sari. You have become a lovely young woman, he said, I was expecting to see a child. When I was a little child and staying with my grandmother he had many a time lifted me by my shoulders to swing me round and round like a ceiling fan. He made me sit near him and he quoted from Huxley and Bertrand Russell. He was thin, walking with a stoop and had bad teeth. But he looked intellectual.

My favourite author at that time was Oscar Wilde and my favourite poem the 'Ballad of Reading Gaol'. He talked about homosexuality with frankness. Many of us pass through that stage, he said. I was afraid that my grandmother might come

and hear the uninhibited talk. When the sky darkened, he looked at it and rose to go. Will you walk with me to the hedge, he asked me. At the hedge, beside the Damson tree, he embraced me, and puzzled by his conduct I ran back to my house.

That very night my grandmother came to my room and told me that I ought to marry him. Das is a very good young man and entirely without vices. Your parents and his mother feel that you two should get married soon. What is the hurry, I asked her, knowing well that neither she nor anybody else of the older generation would ever speak the truth to a fifteen-year-old child.

It had been clear to me that my home was broken up for incomprehensible reasons. My mother was living in Malabar while my father stayed on at Calcutta. It was not a complete family like everybody else's. Whenever all of us got together and I began to feel secure, some cruel illogical destiny always rudely brought the edifice down, like a house of cards. It was obvious that my father wished to retire and come away to settle down in Malabar with my mother. I was a burden and a responsibility neither my parents nor my grandmother could put up with for long. Therefore with the blessing of all, our marriage was fixed. Not yet, I said. Let me go back to Calcutta to finish my exam....

Before I left for Calcutta, my relative pushed me into a dark corner behind a door and kissed me sloppily near my mouth. He crushed my breasts with his thick fingers. Don't you love me, he asked me, don't you like my touching you.... I felt hurt and humiliated. All I said was "goodbye".

21

His hands bruised my body and left blue and red marks on the skin

Returning to Calcutta after my engagement I became moody and my mind clouded over with doubts. Had I been reckless in accepting the proposal ? He did not look healthy. Quoting effortlessly from Aldous Huxley was not a major accomplishment. Would he be a kind father to my children ? Would he be considerate ?

My friends in Calcutta were shocked to hear of the engagement. You are only a child, they said. You should complete your education before thinking of marriage. It is all fixed, I told them, so let us not waste time discussing it.

My father invited my fiance to Calcutta for a week's stay, and when he came from Bombay and got off the plane wearing a woollen suit and his face unshaven, I watched him with distaste, leaning against the railings at Dum Dum. In the car on our way home, he pressed my fingers amorously and asked me if I had changed. The driver was watching us in the rear view mirror with amusement.

My father had bought tickets for us for every afternoon show and had booked tables at the best hotels for our meals. We were left alone and probably my father thought that I would enjoy being alone with the young man. Whenever he found me alone in a room, he began to plead with me to bare my breasts and if I did not, he turned brutal and crude. His hands bruised my body and left blue and red marks on the skin. He told me of the sexual exploits he had shared with some of

the maidservants in his house in Malabar. The poor women born of a peasant stock were accustomed to a clumsy rapid mating like that of the birds, for their men had very little time to spare for niceties of any kind, since all the incomplete chores waited for them, the hoeing, the ploughing, the chopping of firewood and the feeding of livestock.

My cousin asked me why I was cold and frigid. I did not know what sexual desire meant, not having experienced it even once. Don't you feel any passion for me, he asked me. I don't know, I said simply and honestly. It was a disappointing week for him and for me. I had expected him to take me in his arms and stroke my face, my hair, my hands and whisper loving words. I had expected him to be all that I wanted my father to be, and my mother. I wanted conversation, companionship and warmth. Sex was far from my thoughts. I had hoped that he would remove with one sweep of his benign arms, the loneliness of my life...

When he went back to Bombay, my father told me that he was happy to see that I had found my mate. The word mate with its earthy connotations made me uneasy. I felt lost and unhappy. I could not tell my father that I had hoped for a more tranquil relationship with a hand on my hair and a voice in my ear, telling me that everything was going to be all right for me. I had no need at all for rough hands riding up my skirts or tearing up my brassiere.

I did not know whom to turn to for consolation. On a sudden impulse, I phoned my girl-friend at the hostel. She was surprised to hear my voice. I thought you had forgotten me, she said. I invited her to my house. She came to spend a Sunday with me and together we cleaned out our bookcases and dusted the books. Only once she kissed me. Our eyes were watering and the dust had swollen our lips. Can't you take me away from here, I asked her. Not for another four years, she said. I must complete my studies, she said. Then holding me close to her, she rubbed her cheek against mine.

When I put her out of my mind I put aside my self-pity too. It would not do to dream of a different kind of life. My life had been planned and its course charted by my parents and relatives. I was to be the victim of a young man's carnal hunger

and perhaps, out of our union, there would be born a few children. I would be a middle-class housewife, and walk along the vegetable shops carrying a string bag and wearing faded chappals on my feet. I would beat my thin chidren when they asked for expensive toys, and make them scream out for mercy. I would wash my husband's cheap underwear and hang it out to dry in the balcony like some kind of a national flag, with wifely pride...

During that morose month, a family-friend arrived with her little daughter and her 18-year old son to stay as house guests for a month. The lady had several friends in the city and visiting them kept her busy. The son was with me all the time taking my photographs with a camera that his uncle, an ambassador, had brought for him from China and singing Hindi film songs. He took me to the Victoria Memorial and posed me against trees and against the flowing water.

I felt beautiful when he was with me, arranging my limbs shyly with a blush pinking his cheeks. He was stocky and fair-skinned. He had taken part in revolutionary activities and was a student-leader. What are you planning to be, I asked him. I shall graduate and then get out of the damn country, he said. He was unhappy at home. He found in me a kindred soul. You are getting married, he said, one day ; I wonder why you are in such a hurry. I want to escape too, I said. He nodded. We sat for hours on the grass chewing the wheat grass and sharing a silence that was as gentle as the winter's sun. My cook told me that together we made an excellent couple. Marry this young man, he told me. He is young and healthy. But he has no job. How will he maintain me, I asked him. All girls are the same, said the cook. They only think of money.

When the young man reached his home town, he wrote that he would come to attend my wedding. I did not reply to his letter.

I got married in the month of February. The mango trees were in brown bloom and the blue bees flew about humming in the sun. All the flowering trees were in bloom including the ancient Nirmatala which perfumed even the inner rooms with its spring.

For days before the wedding the servants and field-hands dug up the clumps of grass and smoothed down the yards filling the gorges and taming boundaries. They constructed a shamiana with thatched palm leaves and decorated it with garlands of white paper flowers. They spread unbleached linen on the reed mats and wrapped the pillars with coloured paper. Beyond that in the garden they made a small pond and filled it with lotuses that looked wilted on the wedding day. All the guests commented on the magnificence of the garden where little mango trees with ripe fruits had been uprooted and planted in a row. My father beamed with pleasure. Every one talked of it as the most expensive wedding of the year. Behind the house in the open yard the cooks from Calicut had set up their own tents and were busy making sweets and the traditional dishes of a Nayar wedding. One of the rooms contained nothing but laddoos. Another contained fruits.

All this glut made me feel cheap and uncomfortable. Marriage meant nothing more than a show of wealth to families like ours. It was enough to proclaim to the friends that the father had spent half a lakh on its preparations. The bride was unimportant and her happiness a minor issue. There was nothing remotely Gandhian about my wedding. On the night after the wedding there was to be a Kathakali show for which the best players had been brought from Kalamandalam. When I remarked cynically on the extravagance, my grandmother scolded me. You ought to feel grateful to your father for arranging such a lavish wedding for you, she said. Go up to your room and rest there. I do not want our relatives to think that the bride is a tomboy.

I was too excited by the noise and the bustle to hide in my room looking demure and shy. I hid myself in the servant's quarters. It was obvious to me that I did not at all match the grandeur of the marquee and the garden. The backdrop deserved a more elegant bride, one who was glamorous and beautiful. A dynamo lit up all the coloured bulbs hanging from the trees and on the eve of the wedding I ran with other children all over the garden playing hide and seek noisily while our older relatives

slept out their fatigue lying on the new mats spread out on the cool floor of the hall.

When I finally went up to sleep, the clock in the hall chimed four times and my mother rose from her bed for the morning prayer. Two hours later my grandmother woke me up and sent me for a bath. You are the bride, she said, people should not see you before your bath. Wear a good saree and go to the temple for your prayers, she said and when I opened my eyes wide and gazed at her, her eyes slowly filled up with with tears. Are you crying, I asked her. Why should I cry, child, she said, today is a happy day for all of us.

I pushed my way through strangers and went in to bathe. My maidservant had placed in the bathroom two pots of oil, some lentil paste and the shampoo made of the leaves of the hibiscus. I merely washed myself with a soap in a hurry and dressed myself in a white sari.

The young relatives cried out in disappointment ; you don't look a bride, you are too plain to be a bride, they exclaimed.

22

Wedding night : Again and again he hurt me and all the while the Kathakali drums throbbed dully

What I remember most of my marriage day was that I let down my eighteen-year-old friend who had made me promise to sit near him during the evening's Kathakali show. The Kathakali started after everyone had had dinner and the moon was right above our house, circular and blazing.

My house emptied itself of people and I found myself alone with my husband who told me that it was not his intention to see the Kathakali. Let us stay at home, he said pulling me to the bedroom where the gifts we had received lay scattered on the floor and the bed-sheet was crumpled and untidy. The servants had forgotten to arrange the room before leaving for the show.

I took off my sari which was of heavy gold tissue and sat on the bed. Then without warning he fell on me, surprising me by the extreme brutality of the attack. I tried unsuccessfully to climb out of his embrace. Then bathed in perspiration and with my heart palpitating wildly, I begged him to think of God. This is our wedding night, we should first pray to Krishna, I said. He stared at me in disbelief. Was I mad ?

The rape was unsuccessful but he comforted me when I expressed my fear that I was perhaps not equipped for sexual congress. Perhaps I am not normal, perhaps I am only a eunuch, I said, and in pity he held me close to him and said, even if

that is so, we shall be happy living together....Again and again throughout that unhappy night he hurt me and all the while the Kathakali drums throbbed dully against our window and the singers sang of Damayanti's plight in the jungle.

By morning I could hardly move my limbs but when my mother woke me up at six to meet the guests who were going away I slid down the stairs and saw my friend with the camera slung over his shoulder looking up at me. My eyes filled with tears, but I could not speak. He looked at me for a minute or two and without a word went his way.

We did not get away for a honeymoon. My husband came from a joint family and had several young cousins who liked to flock around him admiringly. He wanted to bask in their love and remain where he was. I was to become just another of his admirers, one more relative to submit to his clumsy fondling. I remained a virgin for nearly a fortnight after my marriage. He grew tired of the physical resistance which had nothing to do with my inclinations.

I was at that time deeply in love with him and would have undergone any torture to be able to please him, but my body was immature and not ready for lovemaking. For him such a body was an embarrassment, veteran that he was in the rowdy ways of sex which he had practised with the maids who worked for his family.

I thought then that love was flowers in the hair, it was the yellow moon lighting up a familiar face and soft words whispered in the ear...At the end of the month experiencing rejection, jealousy and bitterness I grew old suddenly, my face changed from a child's to a woman's and my limbs were sore and fatigued. Then we went to Bombay to stay with his friends who were unmarried, in a little flat called 'Deepak' at Santa Cruz, where we were given permission to sleep in the sitting room at midnight after the card-playing visitors had left. Before dawn I rose to wash my face and to fold up my mattress before the others came into the room to read the newspaper which was thrown at five from the road beyond the iron gate.

The men ate their breakfast of rice and hot curry at nine, calling it lunch and afterwards went to work, leaving me alone with the cook who wandered around until five when he returned to receive his masters and give them tea. I was hungry and miserable during those days, and when I became pregnant, the continual vomiting made me worse.

One day I fainted in the bathroom and lay there on the damp floor for a while, becoming conscious much later, feeling the water flowing beneath my head, and hearing its swishing sounds. I lost weight rapidly. I did not get enough sleep at night, for my husband took me several times with a vengeance and in the day there was no food for twelve hours after that chilli-laden meal of rice and curry.

One day my father arrived from Calcutta on some official work and came from Taj Mahal Hotel where he was staying to see me. He took me out to the Victoria Garden Zoo for he knew that I was fond of seeing animals, and, together we sat on the circular wall of the pond where the alligators resided and he asked me why I looked so thin. I thought you would put on some weight after marriage, he said. I wished then to cry and to tell him that he had miscalculated and that I ought not to have married the one I did, but I could not bring myself to hurt him.

My father was an autocrat and if he went wrong in his decisions he did not want ever to hear about it. I was mature enough then to want to protect his faith in himself. After an hour he took me to a shop and bought me a Singer Sewing Machine.

In the evenings, my husband took me for walks but my legs used to hurt, hungry that I was and weak with vomitings. I was not much of a companion for him. Any sign of kindness from people made me weep like a child. He grew weary of my temperament very soon and one day suggested that I go home to my grandmother for rest. I disliked the idea, for seeing him and sleeping near him had become precious to me. I cannot get on without you, I said. But his friends, who felt pity for my condition persuaded him to send me home.

Tearing myself away from the man who did not ever learn to love me, I went back to Malabar with an uncle who had been sent to take me home. My grandmother wept when she saw me. She called an Ayurvedic physician to get me examined for illnesses which may have seized me in Bombay. Under his treatment and in the care of my grandmother, I forgot my miserable honeymoon days and became once more healthy.

In the mornings I went into the prayer room with my grandmother and sat for an hour listening to her read the Bhagavatham and the Gita. One day I felt a quickening in my womb and knew that my child had become a live being. My son is moving, I whispered to my grandmother. How do you know it is a son, asked my grandmother, smiling at me. It will be a son and he will look like Krishna, I told her.

Through the smoke of the incense I saw the beauteous smile of my Krishna. Always, always, I shall love you I told him, not speaking aloud but willing Him to hear me, only you will be my husband, only your horoscope will match with mine....

23

A gold coin for love

The best toy that can be given to a teenaged girl is a live baby, a soft, smooth-skinned doll that she can bathe, powder and suckle to sleep.

When the labour began, I put old records on the gramaphone and chatted courageously with my cousins who had come to watch me have the baby. All of them sat outside my door, leaning against the verandah wall. The most excited of all was my younger brother who kept asking me every minute or so if the baby was coming out.

I was not prepared for the great pain that finally brought the baby sliding along my left thigh, and I could not smother my scream. But the doctor who was my friend Raji's father patted me on my cheek and said, "Well done Joe, you have a lovely little son."

Everybody flocked in then to admire the little one who had a high forehead and a milky skin. I shrieked with delight when I saw him for the first time. I shall call him Monoo, I said. He looks so much like Lord Byron... In those days I had on my dressing table a photo of the dead poet. I had wanted my son to look like him. There was something wrong with Monoo's feet when he was born. It used to fold up like an unused wing against his leg. Even the flaw delighted me. Did not Byron have a defective foot too ?

My grandmother repaired the foot with daily massage. My grandmother and my mother-in-law sat for hours on the southern portico fondling the child and admiring his charms. Now

and then I would pause in my games to rush to my son and feed him at my breast. I did not wish to give him anything other than the nourishment that I held in my body. He thrived on it and grew plump and lovely.

Having him at my side during the night reminded me of my husband and I wrote asking him to come home on leave. When he arrived, he grew disgusted with the child who woke up several times during the night to take his feed. Take him away to your grandmother's room, he cried angrily. I cannot sleep with all this noise and fussing. The baby clung to me and I sensed that he too felt the humiliation of our position.

I took him to my grandmother and the three of us slept soundly on her single mattress laid out on the floor. Before I fell asleep I told my grandmother that I should have done better at Arithmetic in school. Why do you say this now, asked my grandmother. Then I wouldn't have been married off so soon, I said. She laughed, covering me and my son with a shawl, gently.

During his stay in Malabar, he spent most of his time with his cousins and his sister-in-law, paying me little attention and never bothering to converse with me. At night he was like a chieftain who collected the taxes due to him from his vassal simply and without exhilaration. All the Parijata that I wove in my curly hair was wasted. The taking was brutal and brief. The only topic of conversation that delighted him was sex and I was ignorant in the study of it. I did not have any sex-appeal either. I was thin, and my swollen breasts resembled a papaya tree. How much more voluptuous were my maidservants who took for my husband his bath-water and his change of clothes while he waited impatiently in the dark bathroom at Nalapat !

I yearned for a kind word, a glance in my direction. It became obvious to me that my husband had wished to marry me only because of my social status and the possibility of financial gain. A coldness took hold of my heart then. I knew then that if love was what I had looked for in marriage I would have to look for it outside its legal orbit. I wanted to be given an identity that was lovable.

When he returned to Bombay the first letter that he wrote was not to me but to a girl-cousin who had allowed him to hug her while he walked towards my home in the evenings. I made up my mind to be unfaithful to him, at least physically.

My father was at that time getting built a modern house only a few yards away from the old Nalapat House, for he was a non-vegetarian and wanted such fare that could never be allowed in the Nalapat kitchen. Among the workers, there was a young bricklayer who had come from another village on contract. He was extremely handsome. My cousins and I kept visiting the site to watch him at work. He used to make indecent suggestions to my maidservant which she confided in me. I thought it a good idea to have him as a pet.

When the work was nearly over I sent my maidservant to the place where he was staying with a gold coin as my gift and an invitation to meet me near the shrine of the Bhagavati in the evening after moonrise. But my maid came back to tell me that he had already left for his village. I did not know his address. Find out where he lives and get him back to this village I told her. I shall give you my gold chain if you get him this week...

I was ready for love. Ripe for a sexual banquet. It showed in the way I walked and in my voice that had gradually ceased resembling a boy's. A cousin of ours one day grabbed me when I was climbing the stairs whispering, "you are so beautiful" and although I did not believe him, in sheer gratitude I let him hold me in his arms for a couple of minutes. He panted with his emotion. When he kissed me on my mouth I disliked the smell of his stale mouth.

That was probably the most bewitching spring of my life. The bhajans of Meera on my gramaphone, amorous cousins and the clusters of Neermatala at the snakeshrine. And, in the night the moon grazing at the outlines of my baby-son's face and his fingers at my breast. My husband faded into an unreal figure, became a blush on the horizon after the sun had set. I had stopped loving him. When his letters came, I put them away in a drawer. He wrote mostly about a friend of his who stayed at the Y.M.C.A. with him and was his constant companion.

You will like him very much when you meet him, he wrote.

Ultimately it was decided that I must join my husband and resume my marital life. My cousins were heart-broken. No more singing and no more walking in the evenings. My mother-in-law and two servants accompanied me to Bombay where a small flat had been bought at Hari Nivas near Dadar for all of us to stay in. It had a common verandah where the neighbour's servants stood peering into our rooms to see if we were modestly dressed while relaxing at home. This irked my mother-in-law.

She was a member of one of the wealthiest joint families in Malabar and was also its eldest lady. The city's shabby met hods of collecting sub-standard grains from the ration shops and living shut up in little nests of concrete in the air seemed to her revolting. She was used to large open spaces and flowering trees. She was used to hordes of servants obeying her slightest whim.

In Bombay at Hari Nivas near the Citylight cinema on a street smelling of buffalo urine she was merely an old woman, a Madrasi lady whose skin was fair as a Kashmiri's, someone the children and the servants could stare at when there was nothing better to do and the evenings were long.

24

I sent the cook out to get some barbiturates

My mother-in-law grew visibly upset whenever anyone looked in through our windows. She grumbled about the inconveniences of our flat which included the elderly maidservant who had turned disobedient, the cook who cheated at accounts and the proximity of girls who lured me out of my home to play a version of hopscotch with them on the terrace.

Our next-door neighbours were the Marathes whose second daughter at that time was a popular film actress with a busy schedule. Her name was Usha Kiran. Her two younger sisters became my dear friends, and during the four weeks preceding the Ganesh festival, we rehearsed on the terrace for hours every evening, the many items of entertainment such as the Gujarati Garba, the Punjabi Bhangra and the Hindi play.

The youngest girl, Pushpa, was gifted with a rich, vibrant voice. She taught me the Marathi film-song, "Nachatho Varuni Anand... Vachavi Pava Govind"... In their company I forgot the bitterness of life and became for a few short hours the carefree person that I was before I came to Bombay.

My mother-in-law sulked, for she felt that I was spending too much time away from my child and my domestic responsibilities. Whenever she said disgruntled things my husband grew angry, and his anger was directed against me and the baby. The servants could not get on with my mother-in-law. We are going back to Malabar, they said every day, we cannot bear such nagging. My husband was also missing his evenings with the young

man at the Y.M.C.A. and with me, he was terse and impatient.

One day, being able to bear it no longer, I sent the cook to a chemists' shop for a dozen tablets of Barbiturates. No chemist would give them without a doctor's prescription. The cook, on his return, empty-handed, told me with tears in his eyes, that he too would take some tablets if I decided to kill myself. Then the maidservant came up to me and said that she was planning to get run over by a bus. I cannot live on like this, she said. All three of us were miserable. My husband stopped me from going up to the terrace for the rehearsals in the evening. You must remember you are a wife and mother, he said. My friends passing our window, glanced at me with pity in their eyes.

Then I settled down to housekeeping and sewed the buttons on and darned our old garments, all through the hot afternoons. In the evening, I brought for my husband his tea and a plate of snacks. I kept myself busy with dreary housework while my spirit protested and cried, get out of this trap, escape... In the mornings when my husband left for work, I ran behind him and stood near the corner of the road where the cows were loitering and the crows pulled out fishbones from the open garbage boxes. Then I watched him walk away with his briefcase towards the railway station to catch the first train to Churchgate. It was only after my return that I bathed or changed my dress.

Often, from behind the house and from the dirty seashore, the smell of rotting fish would enter our back verandah, from which I watched a municipal school's children parade in the morning, singing a patriotic song and the huts of the bootleggers who buried their wares in tins at night and slept on charpoys in the day, while the sun climbing over them, burnt their skin black. The bootleggers were full of distrust for strangers and once or twice when I went strolling past their colony, they turned their hostile eyes towards me.

Of the many huts, one was bigger and its occupants were better dressed. The man was short and handsome with a yellow skin. His dress was a white singlet and a khaki pair of shorts

but they were washed every day by his wife who seemed to love working for him. She used to bring for him glasses of milk while he lay on a charpoy under a tree, dozing. She fed him well and although from my height, I could not hear what she was telling him, by the look on her face, I could make out that they were love-words. He was silent and sullen as all men are, when they are being loved too deeply by a woman. He used to gaze at her indifferently while she turned her back on him and walked back to their hut.

Everybody in that colony showed him respect, even the police constables who used to come in trucks off and on to poke the ground with long iron rods to see if anything had been buried there. He would laugh aloud, seeing them at it. On some days when he was not very sleepy, he would play with his little sons throwing them in the air and catching them while they chortled with joy. He liked to watch his wife washing their rounded bodies near the hydrant, soaping them and rubbing hard until they turned a burnished copper. He was obviously proud of his progeny.

One day while I stood leaning over the railings of my verandah watching him sleep, he opened his eyes all of a sudden and looked at me. They were eyes reddened with sleep and desire. I felt uneasy while they grazed my limbs and withdrew to my room in a hurry. One morning we woke up hearing a commotion in the backyard and saw the police take him away in their truck. They had at last found the liquor which he had made at night in his hut and stored in two wooden barrels. His wife ran behind the truck with the end of her pink sari flying for a few yards, but he did not once look at her. He sat on one of the barrels looking like a king, his handsome face impassive and cold.

When my mother-in-law's dissatisfaction increased and the servants became constant grumblers, my husband decided to send us all back to Malabar. The decision was welcomed by all. One of his uncles came to Bombay to take us home. He was to stay for three days only but being a dandy, had got made two suits of sharkskin for the Bombay trip. He was a great one for girls, a man with a reputation and so the first thing he wan-

ted to know from me was the address of a nurse named Meenakshi who had come to Bombay from our village to take up a job in one of the city hospitals.

I did not know such a person. He was very disappointed, but with determination went out each morning to enquire at every hospital for Meenakshi, for whom he had made such delicious plans and also the pink sharkskin suits.

When we left by train at last, we found as the occupant of one berth, a well-known Congress woman who was delighted to meet our uncle and together they enjoyed a lengthy conversation that lasted until three in the morning. My mother-in-law was tired and slept soundly on the train. I lay near the baby listening to the talk which sounded hypocritical and comic. I have always been cherishing certain high principles, said the lady and my uncle said, of course, of course, what else should a lady cherish....

25

The blood-stained moonlight

Before I returned to Bombay, my husband, on the advice of his best friend, had sold our flat at Hari Nivas and moved into a rented one at Khar to be near him. He probably felt that such a move would alter favourably the nature of our marriage. I had brought with me a cook, an ayah for the baby son and a fifteen-year-old maid to help me with my toilet, although we could hardly afford such a retinue.

My husband left for his office every morning before nine and returned at ten in the night after our son had fallen asleep in his room, on the babycot beneath which the old ayah spread out her own mattress. There was no opportunity for the father to get to know the child, or to learn to regard him as a distinct personality.

Children are intuitive about people and feel more than adults a sense of rejection, and, by and by, he began to dislike his father who was only an ominous presence at the house on Sundays.

Often he rose from his bed at midnight to come knocking at my door, weeping aloud for me while the old woman mumbled comforting words sleepily and in a raucous voice. My husband hated those midnight scenes and shouted at all three of us. One night the two-year-old was locked up in the kitchen and left to lie there on its cold floor bawling.

I felt miserable. I had lost whatever emotional contact I once had with my husband who was at that time busy preparing for his superiors, a Rural Credit Survey Committee Report

and had no time at all for his family. His nerves were perpetually on edge and I did not once try to argue with him. I let him take my body every night, hoping that the act would relax his nerves and make him tranquil. At night after all had slept, I sat in our tiny sitting room, sobbing and trying hard to believe in a destiny that might change for the better.

It was true that I had my friends, the ladies of the neighbourhood who came every morning to taste what my cook had made for my lunch and to sit on our sofas and gossip, but each of them basked in the warmth of a successful marriage and could never, never, understand why I was so different and felt so deprived.

I could not admit to all that my marriage had flopped. I could not return home to the Nalapat House, a divorcee, for there had been goodwill between our two families for three generations which I did not want to ruin. My granduncle, the poet Narayana Menon, had married from my husband's family, and, besides, my best friend in the world, Malati, was a member of that family.

My parents and other relatives were obsessed with public opinion and bothered excessively with our society's reaction to any action of an individual. A broken marriage was as distasteful, as horrifying as an attack of leprosy. If I had at that time listened to the dictates of my conscience and had left my husband, I would have found it impossible to find another who would volunteer to marry me, for I was not conspicuously pretty and besides there was the two-year-old who would have been to the new husband an encumbrance.

I did not have the educational qualifications which would have got me a job either. I could not opt for a life of prostitution, for I knew that I was frigid and that love for my husband had sealed me off physically and emotionally like a pregnancy that made it impossible for others to impregnate afterwards. I was a misfit everywhere. I brooded long, stifling my sobs, while in the four tiny rooms of our home, slept soundly, the husband, the son, the old ayah, the cook and the young maid.

Once when my husband was away in Orissa on an official

tour, my son ate some castor seeds which he plucked from a hedge and became violently sick. After the incessant vomiting the child turned blue and his skin became leathery. He resembled a puppet fashioned to look like an old man, with dark rings under his eyes and limbs that moved jerkily while he uttered shrill little cries sounding like a bird's. He kept calling out to me, although I was the one who held him in my arms and rubbed his rigid back, while he threw up quantities of greenish vomit.

Our doctor who was an old man, seemed visibly upset. He tried to comfort me by saying that God was never unkind without a purpose which only He knew. The doctor brought to our house at midnight, when everything else failed, the well-known paediatrician, Dr. Patel, who began to inject glucose into the child's veins. I left the group and went to my kitchen where I lay on the floor, praying for his recovery. In my thoughts then, there was only the beautiful, the incomparably beautiful face of Guruvayur's Krishna and him smile. Childishly I vowed that I would remove all my ornaments and lay them at the idol's feet if the child was saved. A few minutes later, the child fell asleep and his breathing became normal.

The child's illness was a shock. The growing misery inside me, the darkness that lay congealed, removed from my face all that was once pretty. I was like a house with all its lights put out. I walked up and down in our rooms wearing a torn saree and although my legs ached for rest, the movement went on and on as if they were propelled by some evil power. I stopped washing my hair. My husband told me that I was going mad. Perhaps I was, but it was not within my power to arrest its growth.

At this time my husband turned to his old friend for comfort. They behaved like lovers in my presence. To celebrate my birthday, they shoved me out of the bedroom and locked themselves in. I stood for a while, wondering what two men could possibly do together do get some physical rapture, but after some time, my pride made me move away. I went to my son and lay near him. I felt then a revulsion for my womanliness. The weight of my breasts seemed to be crushing me.

My private part was only a wound, the soul's wound showing through. Why are you weeping, Amma, asked my little son and I shook my head, saying nothing, nothing....

Whenever I lay clutching my husband's feet at night, I felt that his love was never to be mine. It had luckier takers. One night I left my sleeping family and went up to our terrace to gaze down at the winding road that led up to Danda and the fishing colony. There were puddles of moonlight in the courtyard and on the roads.

I wanted, for a moment, to fling myself down, to spatter the blanched brilliance of the moonlight with red blood stains. The moon moved in haste as though it had a date to keep. Under the lamp-post a mad beggar was doing a solo dance lifting his emaciated hands in the air and muttering to himself. The rhythm of his grotesque dance seized my legs. My hair fell loose around my face. I felt then that I was dancing on the most desolate pinnacle of the world. The dance of the last human being....

When I returned home climbing down the dirty stairs, I walked with the slow tread of a somnambulist. I lit the reading lamp in our sitting room and began to write about a new life, an unstained future.

Wipe out the paints, unmould the clay.
Let nothing remain of that yesterday....

I sent the poem to the journal of the Indian P.E.N. the next morning. My grief fell like drops of honey on the white sheets on my desk. My sorrows floated over the pages of magazines darkly as heavy monsoon clouds do in the sky....

26

The first chapter of darkness

My old ayah was a vulgar, talkative woman who liked to wander around making friends with the curious neighbours who paid her money in exchange for delicious gossip or some tobacco which she could tuck between her broken teeth.

She was particularly friendly with the bachelors of the lodges nearby, where, on Sunday afternoons while we lay asleep, she went to unload tales, imaginary or real. She used to mention their names and praise their generosity, but I ignored such talk or paid little heed.

I hated her loud voice and the gaudy way she dressed, nearly always in a red blouse and with her eyes darkened with kajal and her mouth reddened with betel.

One night, while my husband was away in Assam on an official tour and I was lying asleep with a handkerchief tied round my brow to quiet a headache, there was a knock on my bedroom door. Then the door opened and I saw the dark forms of my ayah and a thickset man approaching my bed. Don't you worry, said my ayah. This is the man I talked to you about, the one who used to ask me often about you. He wants to talk to you....

I sat up on the bed in shock and dazed with horror. Why do you bring a stranger to me at this time of the night, I asked the old woman. I am not going to hurt you, said the man as he drew closer to me. Go away, please go away, I cried, but my voice sounded weak, even to my ears. The old woman left us and closed the door, mumbling something. I realized then

that the stranger had bribed her to gain admission into my room at night.

This was to be a rape-scene. I have a headache, I am miserably ill, I said. Be kind to me and leave me alone. The man threw himself down on my body with two strange groans. He smelt of stale liquor and under his weight my limbs became rigid and I wished to raise myself to vomit. Soon enough, after an incomplete rape, he rolled off my body and lay inert at the foot of the bed, hugging my cold feet. He kissed my toes. Won't you forgive me, child, he asked me. I was silent. Will you talk about this to people, he asked me. His mouth on my skin was hot. I shall forgive you, I whispered, but go away, go away...Then he fell asleep.

I rose to go near my son who stirred from his sleep and threw his arm around me. My heart thumped widly. When I woke up, it was past seven and the rooms were filled with the yellow sun. I went to my room and looked under the bed. I opened the wardrobe to peer in. What are you looking for, asked the ayah. Was it only a nightmare, the stench of liquor and the tearing pain ? When I talked about the midnight visitor, the old woman muttered aloud, child, you are mad...

From the next day I began to share my bedroom with my son Monoo. We had devised a form of amusement which was unique. I would hide under the bed behind the hanging counterpane and talk to the child, disguising my voice. I am Krishna, I would tell him. I have come from Vrindavan to talk to you. And Monoo would believe it and begin a long conversation with the God-child, asking Him what He had for breakfast and what games He played later. Monoo made friends with all the major Gods of the Hindus this way, talking to them while they hid beneath his bed. Often I would hold up a packed gift of sweets, saying that it was a gift from Vrindavan. Monoo would only see the tips of my fingers which would have been painted blue with blue ink. Won't you come to my birthday party, Monoo asked Krishna and He said of course I shall be there...

There was an imaginary life running parallel to our real life. I filled his childhood with magic and wonder. Always he smiled

with the sheer happiness of being alive. He sat on my knee looking like the infant Krishna....

When I became pregnant for the second time, the foundations of my sanity were shaken. Suddenly I took to eating meat and fish. I became short-tempered and temperamental.

During the eighth month of my pregnancy, I went home to Nalapat to be with my grandmother, who was distressed to see the change in me. I would sit still, staring at a dot on the wall for one or two hours, as though hypnotized. Has the child forgotten how to laugh, asked my grandmother. Why has such a change come over her....

My grandmother believed that all pregnant woman needed to be given whatever they wished to eat or drink. So when I told her that I had a craving to drink some alcoholic beverage, she made arrangements for smuggling a bottle into the house, getting my husband's uncle to disguise the bottle so as to make it look like a harmless iron tonic. It was brandy. I did not know how it was to be drunk. My grandmother mixed a few spoonfuls with warm water and gave it to me at bedtime. I sat up that night, writing poetry. My face seemed to swell and there was a warmth moving in me that soothed my nerves.

I was at that time staying in the new bungalow called Sarvodaya, a few yards away from the Nalapat House. During my tenth month, I was addicted to drinking Draksharishta, an ayurvedic preparation made from grapes and molasses. The drink used to intoxicate me, remove from me all the bitterness learnt from life, and make me a happy-looking girl. One night in my drunkenness, I groaned while lying asleep and immediately my parents rushed to my bedside.

There was a grand pain moving within me, like a whale turning on its belly all of a sudden in the sea. What is wrong, Amy, are you getting any pain, asked my father. We heard you moan in your sleep.

In half an hour the child was born. I put aside my sense of decorum and shrieked aloud at the final stage of labour. The midwife kept telling me that I ought to relax. My father, pacing up and down on the portico downstairs, came running up the

stairs when he heard the baby cry. It was a little curly-haired boy. We named him Priyadarsin.

My grandmother and my mother-in-law undertook the task of nursing me back to health. I was given chicken-broth, liver soup, eggnog and rice mixed with fried garlic. In the mornings a maidservant named Unnimayamma rubbed scented oils and a paste of turmeric on my body and after half an hour, washed the stuff off with water reddened with Thetchi leaves. My colour reddened and my body grew plump with her administrations. But I could not abandon the habit of staring at the spots on the walls.

On my return to Bombay I found my unease growing. I wished to escape from my home and walk on and on until at last my feet reached the end of the world. I did not think then that such a traveller would only reach ultimately his starting place and that our ends, our real destinations, are our beginnings.

One's real world is not what is outside him. It is the immeasurable world inside him that is real. Only the one who has decided to travel inwards, will realize that his route has no end. But at twenty, I was ignorant of these facts. So I went through the red ribbon of road that led to the deserted seashore of Danda. I sat on the folded nets of the fishermen and stared at the sea, but its turbulence only aggravated my restlessness.

My husband was advised to call in a psychiatrist. I had begun to shed my clothes regarding them as traps. My old ayah wept guilty tears whenever she saw me in this demented condition. One day the psychiatrist arrived. I had painted two pictures that very week and they showed demons mating with snakes. He examined my pictures before examining me. He read the poems I had composed for my personal diary. He prescribed bromides for me and left the house. She needs rest, he said, and lots and lots of sleep...

After a day or two, my husband took me to Lonavala for a change. There was a heavy and freezing rain, drenching the little hotel we stayed in. My husband dressed me in his woollen trousers and a blue sweater. He fed me hot chicken soup. For hours I lay with my head against his chest, listening to the unpredictable rhythm of the monsoon.

27

For the first time in my life I learned to surrender totally

Madness is a country
Just around the corner
Whose shores are never lit
But if you go there
Ferried by despair
The sentries would ask you to strip
At first the clothes, then the flesh
And later of course your bones
Their only rule is freedom
Why, they even eat bits of your soul
When in hunger,
But when you reach that shore
That unlit shore
Do not return, please do not return....

During my nervous breakdown there developed between myself and my husband an intimacy that was purely physical. It started at the Central Hotel in Lonavala. I was put on bromides, and like the mist floating over hill-stations in the mornings there was a murkiness veiling my consciousness. My senses were like lotuses that folded themselves into tight buds at sunset-hour. The contours of my world had gradually blurred.

After bathing me in warm water and dressing me in men's clothes, my husband bade me sit on his lap, fondling me and calling me his little darling boy. I accepted with gratitude his

tenderness which was but lust, loud and savage, for it seemed like a good substitute for love. I was by nature shy.

Whenever he tried to strip me of my clothes, my shyness clung to me like a second skin and made my movements graceless. Each pore of my skin became at that moment a seeing eye, an eye that viewed my body with distaste. But during my illness, I shed my shyness and for the first time in my life learned to surrender totally in bed with my pride intact and blazing.

But this idyll was shortlived. I was taken away to Malabar and put in charge of an Ayurvedic physician who prescribed cooling lotions for my head. I stayed not at Nalapat but at Sarvodava, the modern bungalow of my parents and spent all my walking hours with my friends who were unmarried and carefree. One day my grandmother requested me to spend a night at the old house with her.

We shall talk far into the night, she said, it will be like old times.... She kept a lighted lamp on the window-sill and waited for me to go there after my dinner. The night was windy and my father did not let me leave the house. The Nalapat house was four hundred years old. Its rafters used to tremble in the wind. I do not want you to spend a night in that ramshackle house, said my father.

At four in the morning I woke up and went up to the verandah to look out. The winds had died down but the lamp was still burning on the window-sill. It symbolized for me the loneliness of old age. My grandmother did not talk about her disappointment. She had perhaps realized that the grandchild who had once lain against her body at night to fall sleep had grown out of the need for the kind of love that only the old could give.

Tragedy is not death but growth and the growing out of needs. I had become to her a stranger, a young woman who had secrets tucked away in her heart, but when after total recovery, I climbed into the car which was to take me to the railway station, my grandmother approached me with reddened eyes and asked, you will come for VISHU (the Kerala new

yèar) in April, won't you...and, being a practised teller of white lies, I held her rough hands in mine and murmured, yes, of course, of course....

Before the second week of April she passed away. She was orthodox and very puritanical. I did not wish ever to cause her unhappiness by my unconventional way of thinking. So when I heard that she had died, a part of me rejoiced at my new-found freedom, while another felt only a deep desolation.

None had loved me as deeply as my grandmother. But within a week after her death, I fell in love with an extremely handsome young man who walked with me from the Khar gymkhana where I had gone in the evening to play tennis. The evening's sun lit up his grey eyes. The gloss of his skin and the beauty of his smile made me feel all of a sudden so awestruck, so humble....

We moved to a cottage near the sea facing the Cuffe Parade in the gaudy month of June when the trees were all in bloom and the yellow butter flies were all over the tiny lawn. Behind the two cottages which were identical was a six-storeyed building called the Dhunastra which was old and vacant. The whole estate belonged to the Reserve Bank of India who were my husband's employers. It stretched from the crowded Wodehouse Road to the lonely Cuffe Parade, beyond which in those days lay marshy land and the gurgling sea. There was a dirt road that led up to the sea but we seldom went near its turbulence, fearing the harsh winds that rose from it at high tide.

Our new home had a porch screened off with creepers, a drawing room full of books and two bedrooms. From my bedroom I could hear the iron gate open and the gravel grate under the feet of visitors who came to see us. We had few friends. There were camelias growing under my window. From my bed I could watch my children play on the lawn chasing butterflies.

My days were filled with incredible sweetness. On the porch the Rangoon creepers bloomed, the tender pinks looking white in the evening's shadows. I hung a brass lamp in the porch and lit it every evening.

One evening when I was seated on the top step of the porch, the grey-eyed friend came to sit at my feet. His lips had a tremor which delighted me. I hope you are not falling in love with me, I said, smiling down at him. He hid his face in the folds of my sari. Outside my sons were playing with the neighbour's children. Inside our drawing room my husband was working on his files....

Soon after our house-move, my son Monoo was stricken with polio and had to be taken to Dr. Patel's polyclinic at Vile Parle for treatment. I was tense with anxiety. Hot fomentations were given to the child, who began to improve gradually but the shuttling between Colaba and Vile Parle tired me out and ruined my looks. I burst into tears frequently for no reason at all.

Six-year-old Monoo asked me, why do you cry, Amma, am I going to die and, I embraced him shaking my head vehemently saying no, no, no. One day my handsome friend visited us at the hospital. My son was lying asleep. I could not talk. All I could do was cry. He held me close to his chest and kissed my wet eyes. Amy, I love you, he said, everything will be all right, my darling....

Who was he to me ? During that summer while the Gulmohurs burnt the edges of the sky, he dressed my hair with scented white flowers plucking them from beneath my window. What did he want from me ? Once or twice standing near him with his arms around my shoulders I whispered, I am yours, do with me as you will, make love to me....but he said, no, in my eyes you are a goddess, I shall not dishonour your body....

Today at Nariman Point the tall buildings crowd one another. But when I was young and in love with a grey-eyed man it was a marshy waste. We used to walk aimlessly along the quiet Panday Road or cross the Cuffe Parade to walk towards the sun. We did not have a place to rest. But in the glow of those evening suns, we felt that we were Gods who had lost their way and had strayed into an unkind planet....

28

My love was like alms looking for a begging bowl

Pigeons on the ledge
Of an afternoon dream
Sit strangely silent
The hot dust rises
Falls on sun-peeled beaks
On a city of fevered
Lanes.
The sun swells; then
Swollen like a fruit
It runs harsh silver threads
Lengthwise my afternoon
Dream.

The old building that hid the crowded Wodehouse Road from our view was called DHUNASTRA and was one that was condemned by the Municipality.

Its walls had deep cracks through which pale shoots of the peepul emerged during the rainy months. Its closed window-panes resembled eyes filmed over by cataract whenever the sun lit them up. On the ledges strutted pigeons who bruised my siesta with their moody whimpers.

On some afternoons feeling restless I used to walk up to the old house, with the red gravel crunching under my sandals and go up the broken staircase that was the crooked spinal cord of the building. I opened several doors to stare at the darkness within and always, always, there were the invisible

rodents scuttling about and the dust rising from the crevices on the floor.

I liked to imagine that Dhunastra was a demon's palace and that at night-time the residents emerged into our familiar dimension to sing and dance. I used to tell such stories to my children and half believe in the imaginary beings myself.

Had I not heard often on moonlit nights the jingle of anklets and the silvery laughter of celestial revellers rising out of the old Dhunastra, when even the street outside was silent and no car moved or honked nearing the petrol station nearby....

I yearned for adventure. I wanted to fling myself into danger. Once standing in the darkened doorway of a room I heard male voices speaking Konkani and saw the blurred outlines of a cauldron and some metal pipes and heard the hiss of steam.

One of the men, a gold-toothed one, turned round and caught sight of me. Delicious moment of uncertainty ! Were they going to kill me ? In another moment I was gone running down the stairs with my heart thumping loudly in my chest.

Later, our milkman told me that the bootleggers were making use of the deserted house for their activities and that I ought not to go there at all. They are killers, he said.

My friend sent me from Delhi a letter that was so silly that it nearly disgusted me. It had fallen into the hands of my husband who read it out aloud to watch my reaction. If you wish to know how much I love you, the young man had written, count the stars in the sky. I blushed with embarrassment for him.

My husband was irked. Amy, I thought you were an intelligent girl. What on earth could have made you encourage such a stupid fellow ? I could not tell him of the other's grey eyes where on afternoons I had seen the sun fall like honey or of his pretty smile or of his dimpled cheeks. My husband removed his glasses to spare me further embarrassment.

Behind that one question of his, lurked all the unasked ones, like invisible arrows waiting to wound me. Don't I feed you,

clothe you and provide warm shelter ? Don't I discharge the connubial responsibilities competently whether you ask for love or not....

My friend, when told of this incident, took leave of me with alacrity. I was a vessel overflowing with emotions. Therefore at that moment watching his back and his brisk walk I could only regard him as a coward. The only truth that mattered was that I had all that love to be given away.

Like alms looking for a begging bowl was my love which only sought for it a receptacle. At the hour of worship even a stone becomes an idol. I was perhaps seeking a familiar face that blossomed like a blue lotus in the waters of my dreams. It was to get closer to that bodyless one that I approached other forms and lost my way. I may have gone astray, but not once did I forget my destination....

Recently our family friend Ram Deshmukh told me of a tree in the university garden, which one morning sprouted blossoms heavy with scent. He had gone there for his morning walk and had stood still for a long while watching the bees crowding the flowers and listening to their hum. He said that it was so much like a carnival. But spring's festivals are so brief.

When he returned to the spot the next morning there were neither the flowers nor the eager bees. The tree stood lonely as before and underneath, on the ground, lay the dead flowers. Deshmukh had felt distressed.

When he told me this story I felt that I was going to burst into tears as beauty seemed to be only a brief season : Yes, I felt that I was that tree for a short while and that on the porch of our cottage facing the Cuffe Parade I had once shone briefly with the bloom of spring. But too soon the autumn had arrived. Too soon the bees had moved away.

One day when I opened the door, there stood like a short-statured God, a stranger dressed in off-white linen and wearing a flat Italian collar. I am Carlo he said. I am your pen-friend....

I had stopped writing to all my friends after marriage and

so felt greatly surprised to see him. He had glossy straight hair and thick red lips. His hooded eyes gave him enormous sex appeal but I did not feel attracted to him physically. He kissed my right cheek, holding with one hand my loose hair.

Tidy up your curly hair, he cried, let me see your face clearly. When we went inside, hand in hand, my maidservant gave us a haughty glance. She distrusted all foreigners. Once when she had watched Nikita Khrushchev drive past our gate, she had nodded her head amiably and remarked, he does not look like a foreigner, he looks very elegant. Who will say by looking at him that he is not a Nair ?....

When Carlo came into my life all the flowers of the university garden had fallen. I was not a misty-eyed girl in love with love.

29

I still yearned for my grey-eyed friend

It was July, a July full of rain, and darkness
Trapped like smoke in the hollows of the sky, and
That lewd, steamy smell of rot rising out of earth.
He walked one step ahead of me, the west wind leaking
Through his hair, and I thought, if I could only want,
Really, really want his love, I shall ride happiness,
Great white steed, trampler of unsacred laws,
If I could only dislodge the inherited
Memory of a touch, I shall serve myself in
Bedroom mirrors, dark fruit on silver platter,
While he lies watching, fair conqueror of another's
Country. I shall polish the panes of his moody eyes,
And in jealous moods, after bitter words and rage
I shall wail in his nerves, as homeless cats wail
From the rubble of a storm....

Carlo was the only son of wealthy parents but I was the wife of a Government employee who struggled with the unpaid bills at the beginning of every month.

He was urbane and sophisticated. The little village called Punnayurkulam which I had left behind clung to me like dirt under my finger nails. I was steeped in folk lore and superstition. I wore around my neck a black thread strung through a talisman made for propitiating the angry Gods. I had four sarees in all and a couple of cotton blouses which I prettied up with embroidery.

At the big hotels where Carlo took me for lunch, I had trouble handling the cutlery. There was nothing that I could

do without a measure of awkwardness, but Carlo said, holding my hand tightly in his, please don't change, please don't change into a Bombay-bitch.

One day, while we were walking towards the Strand Book Shop he told me that we had common foster parents. Had we not grown up listening to the firm voices of Chekov, Flaubert, Maeterlink, Mansfield and Virginia Woolf ? The sounds that our real parents made in our presence had been so indistinct while the dead ones filled our ears with their philosophy. Isabella Duncan told us that love was best when free. We looked at each other in nervousness. Could we follow her example ? Then I blushed purple. You can marry me, said Carlo. You can forget your grey-eyed friend, leave your indifferent husband and come with me to my country.

We can probably have a love affair, I said, remembering the peace of my nights and the faces of my little sons closed in sleep. I am not the divorcing kind.... And I am not Vronsky, said Carlo, laughing.

I used to enjoy crossing the Wodehouse Road to walk past the shops, and, seeing me always in my brown khaddar saree, the shop-men and the drivers loitering around mistook me for a comely 'ayah' and whistled at me. My children looked too fine to be mine, whenever they walked with me, holding my hand with their podgy fingers.

Beginning from the left there was the shop called the Pierottis where John sold us eclairs and watched us eat them, leaning against the counter. Then there was Mr. Shroff's Radio shop where we stepped in just for a minute to say hello and then there was our dear Doctor's dispensary with the young compounder perched on a high stool looking out, and after that there was for us a place to pause, the studio owned by handsome Zafar, who photographed us often and talked about the girl Naseera with whom he was in love.

Outside his studio were the couple who had married for love out of caste and had become pavement dwellers, a thin young man who made his living cleaning cars who was from Madras and his fat Maharastrian bride. Diagonally across was

the children's school, where my sons went to pick up their education most reluctantly every morning.

Near it, was the building where my father's friend Varma lived. When my father was visiting us Varma called us for tea to his flat which was on the sixth floor and had a terrace with granite ledges from which we admired the date-palms and the blue strip of sea that enclosed the Colaba point.

Varma's wife was handsome with long plaited hair and dark eyes. It was on old and dingy-looking flat but her beauty compensated for its drabness. She seemed to be in a bad temper on the day of the tea-party. Obviously, she thought us boorish and not quite her type.

In those days the fair-complexioned folks had some kind of a superiority complex. The British had instilled in us certain mistaken notions of beauty and refinement. It was considered improper to wear colourful clothes for formal functions. The accent was always on mousiness. Ladies of high society preferred to wear clothes of light-grey or off-white, colours favoured by the British. Flamboyance in apparel was regarded as being crude.

But the lower middle classes had a whale of a time dressing up their women in dark reds and dark greens so that they sparkled like gems in the afternoon sun. The women-labourers too wore dark colours and when they carried flat basins of clay or cement they swung their hips with pride and sang in Telugu. Behind my cottage the old house was being taken down and a new one was being made on its site.

For nearly a year our backyard was filled with wire nets and gravel and the two machines from Millars which made a loud crushing sound from ten to six. I enjoyed watching the building up of that new Dhunastra, making friends with the labourers and the overseers who came to us for a drink of water, or for a betel leaf from the ayah's box.

The builders were from the villages of Andhra Pradesh. After six they were paid their wages by the overseer. Then the ladies crowded round the hydrant to take their bath, laughing loudly while their men watched them from a distance. Then the

women kneaded the dough and made thick chapatis which everybody ate with crushed chillis and onions.

The children who were in the day so covered with dust that they resembled dolls made out of straw and mud glistened like blue beetles after their evening baths. They climbed onto their mothers' laps and sucked at the teats, although some of them were as old as five or six. They slept in make-shift huts made of corrugated iron on charpoys.

On Sundays the men drank country liquor and returned to pick loud quarrels with their wives. Then we heard the sounds of weeping and closed our windows to spare them any embarrassment.

July slid by and August arrived, but I still yearned for my grey-eyed friend. Am I ugly, I asked Carlo. No you are a pretty girl but the fellow is a cad, he said. We walked along the narrow dirt road leading to the sea and Carlo held me close to him with an arm around my waist. What is my future, he asked me. Have I a future at all ?

30

Sex and the co-operative movement

Of late I have begun to feel a hunger
To take in with greed, like a forest fire that
Consumes, and with each killing gains a wilder
Brighter charm, all that comes my way. Bald child in
Open pram, you think I only look, and you,
Too, slim lovers behind the tree and you, old
Man with paper in your hand and sunlight in
Your hair. My eyes lick at you like flames, my nerves
Consume; and when I finish with you, in the
Pram, near the tree, and on the park bench, I spit
Out small heaps of ash, nothing else. But in me
The sights and smells and sounds shall thrive and go on
And on and on. In me shall sleep the baby
That sat in prams, and sleep and wake and smile its
Toothless smile. In me shall walk the lovers, hand
In hand and in me, where else, the old shall sit
And feel the touch of sun. In me the street lamps
Shall glimmer, the cabaret girls cavort, the
Wedding drums resound, the eunuchs swirl coloured
Skirts and sing sad songs of love, the wounded moan,
And in me the dying mother with hopeful
Eye shall gaze around, seeking her child, now grown
And gone away to other towns, other arms...

In the year 1957, Cuffe Parade was a secluded street and all its houses, the two-storeyed mellow ones with handsome columns, Gothic arches and bay-windows, faced the sea and its marshy border.

On the iron benches of the Esplanade, the aged inmates of the Parsi sanatorium used to sit, still as statues, absorbing the sun.

The sanatorium was a charitable institution where the poor could get a room for as little as five rupees per month. The majority of its inhabitants were old pensioners whose children, now grown up, did not want them in their modern flats. Every old face looked lonely to me. Often I sat near them, hoping that they would begin to talk to me out of sheer loneliness, but none spoke.

From its verandah the children quarrelled with their mothers and asked for money to buy the cotton candy and the balloons which the peddlers brought to the gate. Quite often there would be loud outbursts from the harried mothers and a few slaps for the children who set up a loud wail. The women wore white frocks with tiny floral prints when they went out and carried large string bags to bring back the groceries. All of them looked anaemic and there was in their limbs a limpness that reminded one of salamanders. I wrote several stories in Malayalam about them, following each of them in my imagination to their rooms hung with net curtains and old sepia tinted photographs.

When the "Mathrubhumi" published my stories, I began to get letters from my readers in Bombay who expressed their admiration. Each letter give me such a thrill. I had then evolved a technique of following each of my characters for the duration of an hour and writing down his or her thoughts. I liked to study people, for I loved them tremendously.

Often my husband would tell our doctor who was a Parsi that I was writing too many stories about his community and laughing, Dr. Masani would warn me that the Parsi Panchayat would soon hear of it and take me to task. How little he knew of the tenderness with which I approached each of my characters.

At about that time, my brother, Dr. Mohandas, decided to marry a pretty relative of ours. Before I left alone to attend the wedding, catching the plane to Cochin, I walked into the new beauty parlour that had been opened by Dhun Bhilpodiwala to see if they could do something to heal my pimples. There was a foreigner, possibly a Pole, named Val who steamed my face and squeezed out the pimples. Then she bleached my face and

sent me up to the loft where a young lady called Miss Master sat waiting to trim my hair. I was astonished at the change in my looks and to go with the new look, I bought a blue silk saree with a red and gold border.

How proudly I walked towards the plane, while my hair swung this way, that way, and the down on my upper lip, bleached by peroxide, gleaming gold in the morning sun. As luck would have it, I sat next to a gentleman who was reading a poem written by me and published in the *Illustrated Weekly of India*. When in the course of conversation I told him that I was the K. Das who had written the poem, he was so delighted that he offered me as a gift a typewriter which graciously, but reluctantly, I refused to accept. You are a stranger, I told him. But every friend was once a stranger, he said, displaying a smile shabbied by yellow, uneven teeth.

A day after my brother's wedding, I returned to Bombay. It was raining hard and the time was late at night. My husband had not come to the airport to receive me. I felt lost and unwanted. But I spotted a lady who had been a friend of my family in Calcutta and got her to reach me home in her car. When I went into my house, my children were fast asleep and my husband lazily told me that I was late.

Why didn't you come to the airport, I asked him. Don't you love me at all ? I sobbed holding him close to me. He said I am tired and sleepy, we shall talk in the morning tomorrow....

In the same year, my son Monoo fell ill with pleurisy. He started to spit toffee-coloured phlegm which I collected in towels and later washed out by dipping them in hot water. It was sticky like chewed gum. Our doctor gave him injections of Streptomycine every day. The cough seemed endless. Even while he slept peacefully, it seemed to me that I was hearing it.

Often at night he would wake out of sleep, leaping up, unable to breathe while his face turned ashen and his eyes widened in fear. But I walked up to the Colaba book stores every evening to get him comics, so that he would not mind so much the discomforts of his illness. We had an oxygen cylinder ready at his beside which I operated each time he got an attack of dis-

noea. When the attack would subside, he would turn to me and embrace me. Am I going to die, Amma, he would ask me, and I would hold him tight and say, shaking my head, no no no....

When Monoo recovered, my thoughts again turned to love, art and literature. I read profusely, lying unbathed in the morning with my face greasy and my hair done in two tight plaits. It was only in the evening that I bothered to pretty myself up a little. I was fond of oil-baths, but too lazy to bathe myself. Often, I would make the old woman rub my body with Ayurvedic oils while I sat calmly on the bathroom's wooden seat reading a novel. My children loved to watch me take such baths.

My favourite oil was the Dinesavalyadi which I used to get by post from the famous Arya Vaidyasala at Kottakkel. My husband thought that it had the sexiest scent of all. He was obsessed with sex. If it was not sex, it was the Co-operative Movement in India, and both these bored me. But I endured both, knowing that there was no escape from either. I even learnt to pretend an interest that I never once really felt.

As my boss says, said my husband one day, the Co-operative Movement has failed, but the Co-operative Movement must succeed. I thought that I would burst out laughing. Who is your boss, I asked him. It is Venkatappiah, formerly of the I.C.S. Have you not heard of him ?

My husband was furious. He felt that I was not up-to-date with the happenings in the field of co-operation. You have not once touched the prestigious report of the Rural Credit Survey Committee, he said. But I let you make love to me every night, I said, isn't that good enough ?

31

He walked in silence a few yards ahead of me...

There was a time when our lusts were
Like multicoloured flags of no
Particular country. We lay
On bed, glassy-eyed, fatigued, just
The toys dead children leave behind,
And, we asked each other, what is
The use, what is the bloody use ?
That was the only kind of love,
This hacking at each other's parts
Like convicts hacking, breaking clods
At noon. We were earth under hot
Sun. There was a burning in our
Veins and the cool mountain nights did
Nothing to lessen heat. When he
And I were one, we were neither
Male nor female. There were no more
Words left, all words lay imprisoned
In the ageing arms of night. In
Darkness we grew, as in silence
We sang, each note rising out of
Sea, out of wind, out of earth and
Out of each sad night like an ache....

In the off-season of November when guests were few and the hotel-rates low, my husband took me and the little boys to Panchgani for a holiday and settled us in a hotel named Prospect.

It was a rambling bungalow with faded prints of stallions and little men in riding habits sporting menacing moustaches,

all hanging slightly askew from the dingy walls of its lounge.

It was situated on the very top of a hill, and while we drove up in a taxi, going round and round along the narrow red road that hugged the mountain range, we heard the sound of children's laughter rising from the valley and saw the red berries in the thickets glow like rubies in the evening sun. Tall grey birches lined the walls of the hotel, trees with a chalky white bark peeling in layers and triangular, notched leaves, and to the left lay the woods, dark, unexplored and waiting for us with its strange aroma. There was gravel in the courtyard.

We were given two rooms, a large bathroom with a leaking faucet and a verandah where we sat on cane chairs and drank our first cup of tea. The children ate buttered toast and Britannia biscuits. The sounds from the valley were carried up to our verandah each time a breeze blew. We heard the bells of the ox cart and the clatter of their wheels.

It is too late to go down to the valley today, my husband said, I am tired and very very hungry. The hotel-boys brought us an early dinner, a brown unidentifiable soup, mutton stew, cutlets and apricot curry. We carried the childrens' beds into our room and slept soundly under the red blankets the hotel had lent us. At night, just before I drifted into deep sleep, I thought I heard the hoot of a screech owl and the deep sough of the wind trapped in the woods.

In the morning, one of the hotel boys woke us by knocking on our door and then we found the mountain dawn, wrapped in the gauze of mist, a delight. After breakfast we dressed in thick woollens and went down to see the bazar which was at the base. The children trotted on ponies while we walked behind them. I could never keep pace with my husband who did not pause to pick ferns, to smell them, or the berries, to take a tiny tentative bite as I did. So he walked in silence a few yards ahead of me. The market was lined with shops and sold walking sticks made out of the blond wood of the birch and with handles shaped to look like dogs' heads, and salad bowls with spoons.

A shoemaker named Salunke followed us back to the hotel

where he measured the feet of our children to make for them shoes of the Sambar leather, softer than even suede and mustard-coloured. Tattooed women came to the hotel bearing flat baskets filled with fresh raspberries laid out on their beds of moss. They had discoloured teeth which they revealed to us when they smiled, after we had lost in the bargaining.

In the afternoon, everybody including the servants of the hotel had a short siesta, and I picked this hour to walk to the woods where, besides the flowers I knew and recognised, the wild cyclamen, the pickerels, the mountain laurels, the narcissus and the exotic rayed lycoris, grew large unfamiliars, savage ones that smelt of slaughter houses and of blood, which I picked in bunches to tie upside down in a dark cupboard for drying (when we packed up to leave after a month, the flowers were dry and held their bright colours intact). From every tree, the squirrels and the humming birds made soft utterances and the woodcock stirred in the undergrowth while I walked through the fallen leaves.

When I returned to the hotel, I wrote a letter inviting my sons, Monoo and Chinnen, to a tea party that was to take place on Saturday under the largest tree near the hotel's wall. I signed my name as Squirrel, and immediately posted it. When my children received the letter, they clapped their hands in joy. When Saturday came, I put them to sleep after their lunch and arranged under the tree, paper plates full of pastry and almonds. At four, I woke up the boys and dressed them in their red cardigans and took them for the party.

They looked about for their hosts who was nowhere to be seen. Perhaps they don't trust you, I said. The cakes were good and the nuts too. But Monoo was a little disappointed. You must teach me the bird language and the squirrel language in a hurry, Amma, he said. My sons then used to believe that I could converse well with birds and animals. Even my husband behaved occasionally as if he believed in my ability to communicate with the animals. Whenever a stray dog came near us wagging its tail, he used to say to me, Amy, please ask this friend of yours to move away, you know I can't stand dogs....

The walls of the hotel had a mysterious dampness which was caused probably by the many slugs that crawled slowly, very slowly, up and down with only their little horns visibly moving. They were big and muddy yellow. After seeing them I could never tackle the brown soup that always preceded the dinner. The soup was delicious and my husband thought me silly to have suspected any connection between its mysteriousness and the presence of the slugs.

During that time my menstrual periods had become irregular and painful. This prevented me from going down to the valley every day with my family. So I sat on the front steps of the hotel, my legs dangling while my eyes roved around, taking in all the splendours of Panchgani.

There was in one of the back rooms, a young man who had come there with an attendant for a rest cure after a serious nervous breakdown. He came to me one evening while I was alone and asked me if I would please clip his nails for him. If they are not cut short, I might scratch people, he said. I brought out my pair of scissors and trimmed his nails for him. He folded his hands in a salute and walked away.

In yet another room, there was an old man of 94 who had completely lost his memory. His sons were in Singapore doing some business and busy making their fortune. They had brought him to the hotel for safekeeping and had, for the benefit of others, left a noticeboard hanging on the door which gave typed details of the old one's bio-data, his post office, his illnesses, his nearest relative's address and of course, his full name. A hotel boy was assigned to look after his needs, but he was all the time left alone, propped up with cushions on a capacious arm chair, where he sat peering at the birches with his bleary eyes.

Some evenings when I found myself alone, I walked up to sit near him and to hold his mottled hand in mine. His hand lay like a dead weight in mine. He was entirely mindless, like a megatherium or some such extinct creature. It was obvious that he could not communicate with the world outside the dark and vaporous prison of his mind. One day I gave him a chocolate but his great fingers crumpled it and threw it away, while his Nepali attendant guffawed at my foolishness.

When we finally left the hotel, we carried dried forest flowers and a pair of sambar shoes for my father, which were later found to be too tight for his feet. The shoemaker had given us his address written in Hindi on a notepaper, but it was mislaid and so none of our friends in Bombay could order from Salunke his beautiful sambar shoes.

After our Panchgani holiday, we still had about a fortnight's leave and so we went to our house in Malabar to stay with my parents. They were happy to see us looking bronzed with the mountain sun. My father had then made an arch with bamboos which was wrapped totally in purple bougainvillae. It led to his cherished garden where the marigolds, the sweet peas and the alamandas were all in blood. Even the hedges held out great clusters of flowers, for it was the month of December, the time of Thiruvathira, the water-festival which the virgins and the married women celebrated by plunging into the cold ponds two hours before the dawn, to splash about and sing.

The chill of the water would cling to their voices, sweetening the already sweet, so that the men rose from their sleep with delicious thoughts of amour. After the bath and the water-games, the women sat around bonfires blackening their eyes with collyrium and decorating their brow with sandal paste and a dot of black "Chanthu", made out of burnt rice. Then they swung on the long bamboo swings tied from all trees to warm themselves and went home to eat a breakfast of arrowroot pudding, banana and tender coconuts.

The observation of Thiruvathira was expected to make women more beautiful. This was a festival dedicated to the worship of Kamadeva, the God of sensual love.

32

It was the beginning of delightful death

When I
Sleep, the outside
World crumbles, all contacts
Broken. So in that longer sleep
Only
The world
Shall die, and I
Remain, just being
Also being a remaining....

After my return from home I slipped into a phase of poor health and like a hibiscus shedding its dark petals my poor body shed red clots on the bathroom floor, and no amount of rest did it any good.

So my husband called in a lady doctor to examine me, and because I liked her smile, immediately I put aside my shyness and stripped before her. She took me to Dr. Shirodkar's for a minor operation and later to her own nursing home at Matunga for recuperation.

It was a small place with only three rooms, a verandah and a hall where the labour usually took place. The doctor whose name was Pankajam Karunakaran stayed on the first floor at night, driving over to her palatial bungalow at Andheri only on Sundays. She had an able assistant named Shantabai and a few young nurses to help her in the delivery of babies.

I was given the best room, the one below the staircase, and one or two of our friends sent me flowers which made its window-sills attractive. I could watch the quiet road beyond the wall from my bed.

A day after the operation I felt a sudden warmth between my legs and found to my horror that it was the beginning of a haemorrhage. The nurses, woken from their sleep, tried to stem the flow but it went on and until in desperation one of them rushed up to call the doctor.

I could hear a kind of silence trilling in both my ears and feel my body grow lighter. At one moment I felt that I was flying about in the room like a chiffon scarf and hovering over the inert body on the bed from which flowed the river of blood. It was the beginning of delightful death which removes, before it stabilizes itself, all anxieties connected with this world.

When the doctor came and gave me the emergency treatment I heard her voice as though from a distance and wanted to tell her that everything was going to be all right for me and that I was happy to have reached that stage, but I could not make my lips move or open my eyes. I discovered then that death was the closing of the lotus at dusk and probably temporary. But her ministrations worked and I returned to life while my body that had chilled warmed with her touch and my ears filled themselves with her gentle voice telling me that I was saved.

If death had been offered as a gift she had knocked that gift away, but I felt only a new love for her. I stroked her hair and kissed her checks while she laughed in relief. I was looking at her as if I were seeing her for the first time. What is it, Amy, she asked me, why do you stare at me like this?...

She was the kindest woman I had ever known. Her patients adored her and when I was well enough to walk about I sat near the hall-window watching the poor patients queueing up with their babies on their hips and the medicine-bottles in their hands. She did not take money from the poor but made them feel that the gratuity was only due to friendship. Every patient felt that she was somebody special.

She was always dressed in pale Kanjivarams and had her

hair tidied into a bun. Occasionally I ran into her clinic and kissed her, smelling the fragrance of her face powder. It was not with happiness that I left her nursing home but the children were happy to get me back for the nightly story-tellings and for the silly games on the lawn.

Then, by and by, my health became almost perfect. The pimples vanished as suddenly as they had arrived. I kept telling my husband that I was in love with the doctor and he said, it is all right, she is a woman, she will not exploit you....

I wrote several stories in Malayalam about the people I met at her nursing home. Whenever a story appeared in a journal I ran with it to my bedroom to lie down and read it, for my heart used to thump so with excitement to see my name in print. I used to publish poems in the *Illustrated Weekly* but under the name K. Das because I suspected the editor to be prejudiced against women writers. He was an Irishman named Sean Mandy. He was a considerate editor and whenever he rejected a poem he sent me the reasons for the rejection. I used to day-dream of meeting him some day at the Gul Mohur where he was supposed to lunch every day. After the meeting he would inevitably fall in love with me....

If he had invited me for lunch then I would have found it difficult to accept his invitation because I spent whatever money I got from the Malayalam journals on buying books from the Strand Book Stall and bought no new clothes at all. In dress I was as shabby as a tramp. I had only one or two pink blouses sewn at home which had tears under the armpit. My sarees were patched up in places, clumsily. I was not exactly the kind of girl who would have decorated the Gul Mohur at lunch-time.

Writing became my only hobby. I wrote almost two stories every week and mailed them, borrowing the money for stamps from my husband. The *Mathrubhumi* sent me twelve rupees per story. Each story took me one full night to finish, for it was not possible to write when the children were awake.

I would put the finishing touches to a story at about six when the family rose from their sleep. I tried to sleep for an

hour or two in the afternoons but the neighbours were friendly ladies who liked to visit my house to chat about clothes, and I found the going rather tough.

In the mornings when the boys were away at school I paintted in oils on an easel set up on the portico. I could only paint women but this I could do well. I used to give my paintings to my friends on their birthdays, Abstract art had not become very fashionable in those days. My friends therefore gladly hung the pictures on their drawing-room walls.

It was a good phase in my life. I had health, looks, books to read and talent. Early in the morning the Gorkha watchman of the building called the 'Gulistan' would wake me from sleep with his meandering song. The Nepali tunes brought with them the mistiness of the mountains and their tragic loneliness. The Gorkha bathed under a faucet while he sang, and we heard the water and the song together, entwined, while we lay on our beds reluctant to rise and the sky slowly paled outside our window.

33

Passing away of my great grandmother

There is a house now far away where once
I received love. That woman died,
The house withdrew into silence, snakes moved
Among books I was then too young
To read, and my blood turned like the moon.
How often I think of going
There, to peer through blind eyes of windows or
Just listen to the frozen air,
Or in wild despair, pick an armful of
Darkness to bring it here to lie
Behind my bedroom door like a brooding
Dog. You cannot believe, darling,
Can you, that I lived in such a house and
Was proud and loved, I who have lost
My way and beg now at strangers' doors to
Receive love at least in small change ?

After the sudden death of my granduncle and then that of my dear grandmother the old Nalapat House was locked up and its servants disbanded. The windows were shut, gently as the eyes of the dead are shut.

My parents took my great grandmother to the house called Sarvodaya where she occupied noiselessly the eastern bedroom on the ground floor, shaded by the tall mango trees through the leaves of which was visible the old beloved house. The rats ran across its darkened halls and the white ants raised on its outer walls strange totems of burial.

My great grandmother had a child's capacity to put away

grief. The old house's death did not trouble her for long. When she was called up from sleep to attend on her dying daughter she only prayed feebly and got ready for the purification bath.

My great grandmother was the only daughter of a wealthy chieftain, the Raja of Punnathore Kotta. She was the only one in our family who went to a temple riding an elephant. When a Nair girl menstruated for the first time she was made to sit on a black rug covered with white mull for three days in strict segregation. She was allowed to wear all the jewellery she possessed and given a gleaming brass mirror to hold before her face.

On the fourth day she was taken out of the house to walk with others in a procession to a pond where amidst loud ululations and laughter she was given a ceremonial bath. Afterwards the women blackened her eyes with collyrium, decorated her brow with sandalwood paste, her cheeks with raw turmeric and her lips with betel. A feast was given to all in the village where the women danced the Kaikottikkali and the young men had a chance to see the girl now turned eligible for marriage.

On the seventh day she was taken to a far away temple. My great grandmother, attaining puberty at eleven, rode her father's elephant to the temple seated elegantly on the howdah wearing the heavy Amadakkottam which covered the upper halves of her delicate breasts, while her maids ran on ahead of her crying out Ho Ho to warn the untouchable communities to steer clear of her path.

Within a year she was married to the Raja of Chiralayman who was stout and had heavy sensual lips. At nineteen she suddenly became very frigid and came away to Nalapat House carrying her little daughter with her, offering no explanation at all. I have watched her so often scrubbing the soles of her feet and cleaning her toenails meticulously twice and thrice each day and I have then suspected that her over-developed sense of hygiene had something to do with her separation from her husband. She must have thought messy the discharge of her marital obligations.

My great grandmother was obsessed with her own sense of punctuality. At twelve, as our hall-clock chimed twelve times she emerged from her room enquiring of her lunch. She ate the blandest of food. Occasionally as a joke we set forward the hands of the clock so that it chimed twelve when the real time was only eleven, and the old lady used to come out demanding food, murmuring I am hungry. When we laughed at her she joined in our laughter too, her laugh sounding lively as a schoolgirl's and entirely guileless. She gossipped with the servants, asked them personal questions about their marriages and was always so happy to settle their domestic squabbles.

When my father decided to leave for Calicut to be the full-time editor of a newspaper, the old one posed a problem. She wished to accompany my parents to the town. But my aunt persuaded my mother to let her carry the old lady to her own house which was about a furlong away. My mother, always mortally afraid of hurting the feelings of relatives allowed her sister to do this. Great grandmother was deposited in a dark room opposite the pantry where she lay curled up on a narrow cot, silent and morose.

My uncle was a famed politician, a Congress M.L.A. who entertained hugely every day and so the meals were delayed affairs, consisting of curries reddened with chillies and fried fish, chicken and biryani. Great grandmother being a vegetarian felt nauseated by the kitchen-smells and gradually lost appetite, and growing weaker day by day her silence thickened into that impenetrable one of death. Years after her death my mother told me that abandoning her old grandmother lay like a weight on her conscience. I could have carried her with me to Calicut, she said, but at that time I only thought of my sister's feelings... The old are destined to be dumped like unwanted luggage, bits of unfashionable junk, and left to perish. How often I have remembered my sweet frail great grandmother and prayed to God that I would not meet with her fate but die early while wanted and cherished.

34

Again and again the same man phoned...

I take leave of you, fair city, while tears
Hide somewhere in my adult eyes
And sadness is silent as a stone
In the river's unmoving
Core......

It's goodbye, goodbye, goodbye,
To slender shapes behind windowpanes,
Shut against indiscriminate desire
And rain; to yellow moons,
So long ignored, so long unloved;
To the birds, flesh hungry,
Circling in the sky
With shrill and hostile cries: to the crowd,
Near the sea, walking or sitting
But always talking, talking,
Talking....

I take leave of you, fair city, keep your tears,
Your anger and your smiles for others,
Young, who come with unjaded eyes;
Give them your sad-eyed courtesans with tinsel
And jasmine in their hair, your marble
Slabs in morgues, your brittle
Roadside laughter....

It's goodbye, goodbye, goodbye,
To the silence and the sounds,
To streets that I never walked
But in dreams, to lips that I never kissed
But in dreams, to children
Lovely as flowers, out of me
Never born....

In the year 1962 there was a Seanza course for the Bankers conducted in Bombay for which delegates from several countries had arrived. One of them who claimed to have some Spanish blood in his veins, visited our house regularly to eat the evening meal with us.

He mixed shreds of an omelette with the rice, sprinkled sauce and ate the mixture with gusto. He was of medium height, with iron-grey hair that looked black when pomaded and eyes that resembled currants which he winked wickedly at me.

One day while I sat at my desk complaining of a headache, he began to massage the back of my neck with soft nimble fingers until I felt the ache leave me and found myself falling asleep. I am a hypnotist too, he said.

My husband thought him excellent company if he had a stock of jokes and anecdotes which made us laugh uproariously. Bring her a glass of water, Das, he said to my husband, and when he was away, I was kissed gently on my cheeks. I rose from the chair immediately. Don't you love me at all he asked, lowering his voice.

The three of us used to go to the old joint, Volga, to hear the husky-voiced crooner and also to dance. Our foreign friend was a graceful dancer and he did not want ever to sit out while a dance was going on. I shall teach you, he said and together we danced while my husband watched us sleepily from his table. On some evenings, our friend bought up all the strings of jasmines that were on sale at Churchgate and decked my hair with them. You are my bride, my sweet bride, he used to whisper while decorating my hair.

My husband did not take these attentions seriously, for the man was anyway old enough to be my father and I was not exactly hard up for male attention.

There was Carlo, the dark-haired young man who stayed at a city hotel, who loved me enough to want to marry me; there was in another city, the one I was infatuated with, and of course at home, there was my husband, passionate and eager as a lover. I was like a poor girl who found herself rich all of a sudden. I was drunk with power. I tried to alter my hairstyle, cut it

shorter and with a fringe that covered all of my forehead. I wore a black blouse with a white saree in the evenings. I was so healthy that even my perspiration was musky.

We had then moved into the new Dhunastra, into a flat on the fifth floor with a verandah that faced the yellow-painted house of the Japanese Consul and his garden, with the four large marble statues.

After my morning bath, I stood on the verandah enjoying the rough winds whipping at my clothes. One day there was a ring from our new phone and when I picked it up, an unfamiliar voice said : "I am XYZ. Good morning to you. I have been watching you from far for the past few weeks, and I am in love".

I rang off in a hurry. I was panic-stricken. I walked up to a mirror to have a long look at myself. Was I resembling a harlot ? Did I look like an easy prey ? I told my husband about the call and as usual, he shrugged it off as something beneath his notice.

There was again and again the same man phoning from a a public booth, the clank of the coin and then the Good morning to You. One day I put an end to this bother. I called him over to my house, and he said apologetically that he was reminded of his wife whenever he looked at me and that I ought to forgive him his audacity. Forgiving was so very easy for a girl as vain and happy I was in those days.

It was at this juncture in my life that my husband was transferred to Calcutta to serve a term of three years. This shattered my calm, for I had to leave not only my younger brother who was working for a postgraduate degree in Paediatrics, but also the only friends who bothered to love me a little.

But my husband's superior was adamant and off we want to Calcutta, leaving my brother on the platform with tears falling from his eyes and a kerchief fluttering from his hand, bravely like a flag. While we were taking off, a cousin warned me to be cautious in dealing with my husband's relatives. They are sly and furtive, they will only try to catch you tripping, he said. Do not be frank and above all, do not be so damned innocent....

35

Calcutta's cocktail season

What is this drink but
The April sun, squeezed
Like an orange in
My glass ? I sip the
Fire, I drink and drink
Again, I am drunk,
Yes, but on the gold
Of suns. What noble
Venom now flows through
My veins and fills my
Mind with unhurried
Laughter? My worries
Doze. Wee bubbles ring
My glass, like a bride's
Nervous smile, and meet
My lips. Dear, forgive
This moment's lull in
Wanting you, the blur
In memory. How
Brief the term of my
Devotion, how brief
Your reign when I with
Glass in hand, drink, drink,
And drink again this
Juice of April suns....

Calcutta is a playground for children between the ages of twenty and eighty. Its winter is called the cocktail season. The participants at such cocktails are normally the industrialists, the smart executives of foreign firms and the Government offici-

als who cannot afford to buy liquor and so must depend on others for their quota of fun.

The Government servants drag their foolish wives to such parties, hoping that their commonness and charm might impress the rich. The rich enjoy being introduced to the Government-wives, and to those who are still young and fresh, they hand glasses of sherry or vermouth with crushed ice and plead in sweet tones, please drink, please let me see the drink put a sparkle in those lovely eyes of yours....

And after the fool has had a drink or two, the rich man gets closer, overpowers the girl with the unfamiliar smell of exotic shaving lotions, leers and whispers, how beautiful your rosy cheeks are today, your beauty is a feast for my starving eyes.

At that precise movement the lady will glance at her husband. panic rising in her bosom. The spouse will be at the other end of the hall, either engaged in the discussion of Japanese Geisha-girls with industrialists who would have cautiously left their wives at home or will be seated behind a large potted palm, pouring out another whiskey into his glass.

The conspicuous greed for liquor and the indifference will disgust the wife. She will begin to drink more and more not because she likes it but only to spite him for having brought her to the accursed party.

Finally, running unsteadily to the bathroom, she will get sick bending over the washbasin and the host or some other lustful man will appear at her side in a trice to rub her back and help her tidy up her face. He will touch all the soft portions of her body, accidentally. Her husband will be lying on a sofa, passed out, after a dozen free drinks, dreaming alcoholic dreams.

To raise him from the sofa and to take him home an army will be required. Therefore giving up all hope, the girl will sit somewhere, tears filling her eyes, while tender-hearted men paw her and coo into her ears.

Such are the kind of games that are being played in Calcutta during its winter. The players are practised liars. Lying will

come so naturally to them that most unwittingly they deceive others. The newcomers of this society will be ridiculed and laughed at. The ones who first embraced me with loving words of welcome later spread unwholesome scandals about me. It was from Calcutta that I lost my faith in the essential goodness of human beings.

We had as a neighbour a kind-hearted gentleman who was old and stout. My husband and I used to visit his house occasionally and eat with him a delicious uppma made of beaten rice and potato. We drank the sherbet made out of the Bhel-fruit. We regarded him as an uncle. He tried to teach me Sanskrit whenever I was willing to learn, but his pronunciation always made me laugh.

When I fell ill with some kind of rheumatism he came to my house, and massaged my bad leg, talking all the while about his funny colleagues at office to make me laugh.

He did not call me by my real name. I was Gayatri to him. He was interested in Hindu mythology and in the Upanishads. When some of my husband's relatives spread the rumour that I was having a love affair with the old one, I felt for him all of a sudden the disgust I ought to have felt instead for the gossips.

I tried then to avoid meeting him. Whenever I saw him coming toward my house I hid myself behind the bathroom door and pretended to be away. One day he brought a garland of marigolds and hung it over my self-portrait which was in my drawing room. I went pale with anger. Why are you angry with me, little one, he asked me. I did not reply. My husband too was bothered about my sudden aversion towards the old man. There is no logic in your attitudes, he said.

I dressed myself only in lungis and wore only black shirts in those days. Lungis had not become fashionable then and so the relatives and friends considered me a freak. I did nothing to make my face pretty. We did not have enough money to spend on good clothes anyway, and if at all some money came my way I spent it all on books.

For parties I had three silk sarees which had been presented to me at my wedding. I did not know then that I raised a

laugh among the ladies whenever I attended a party wearing the same old sarees, the two oranges and the one green.

Although there were tears in my sarees I had people to crowd round me as listeners. I had a large fan-mail. There were at least a dozen men deeply infatuated with me. And, yet I feared Calcutta. I longed to escape from it.

In the summer of the first year, a visitor from Bombay called us for breakfast to his hotel-room, He was intelligent and well-read. There was nothing I liked better than talking about books, and so sitting near him, I was relaxed and happy when suddenly his hand moved closer and closer to my thigh and rested touching it lightly.

I thought that it was accidental. But his hand crept under my thigh and became immobile. What was happening ? Although I had had men falling in love with me, none of them had shown sexual desire. I was loved as a young sister is loved. This man's movements surprised me. He cultivated the habit of stroking my legs during conversation and caressing my long hair. I nearly fell in love with him.

One day when he held me close and kissed me on my mouth I stood acquiescent and after he released me, I asked him are you in love with me, and he said, I like you.

When I told my husband about it, he warned me against loving such a man. He is not capable of loving anyone except himself, my husband said. You are always a child in my eyes, Amy, he said, you may play around with love but be choosey about your playmates. I do not want you ever to get hurt in your life....

36

I was Carlo's Sita

I am today a creature turned inside
Out. To spread myself across wide highways
Of your thoughts, stranger, like a loud poster
Was always my desire, but all I
Do is lurk in culs de sac,
Just two eyes showing...Oh never mind. I've
Spent long years trying to locate my mind
Beneath skin, beneath flesh and underneath
The bone. I've stretched my two-dimensional
Nudity on sheets of weeklies, monthlies,
Quarterlies, a sad sacrifice. I've put
My private voice away, adopted the
Typewriter's click as my only speech; I
Click-click, click-click tiresomely into your
Ears, stranger, though you may have no need of
Me, I go on and on, not knowing why....

My father has always been a teetotaller. He has often told me that liquor should never be served in one's house. All the commandments engraved on the columns of my mind gradually faded, the fierce winds rising out of the Ganges devoured their words and I changed into a disobedient daughter.

Society can well ask me how I could become what I became, although born to parents as high-principled as mine were. Ask the books that I read why I changed. Ask the authors dead and alive who communicated with me and gave me the courage to be myself. The books like a mother-cow licked the calf of my thought into shape and left me to lie at the altar of the world as a sacrificial gift.

There were then no pujas at my house. The sweet name of God did not bloom ever on my tongue. My husband was nearly all the time away touring in the outer districts. Even while he was with me, we had no mental contact with each other. If at all I began to talk of my unhappiness, he changed the topic immediately and walked away.

One day when I could no longer bear my loneliness, I wrote to Carlo asking him for advice. I do not wish to continue living, I wrote. His reply did not come, although months passed. I felt that even he had forgotten me, Carlo, who called me Sita and treated me with awe as though I were a goddess. Perhaps his marriage had changed him.

But one day in the morning, after my husband had left for his office and the children had gone to their school, my servant announced him in. There is a white man, come to see you, said my cook. When I went into the dark drawing room, I found Carlo seated on the old sofa wearing a blue shirt. The cook was peering at us from behind the curtain and, as I was aware of it, I showed little excitement, Carlo stood up and extended his hand. Come to the verandah where we have an excellent pingpong table, I said. We played an indifferent game for few minutes. Then Carlo bade me sit near him on the wide ledge of the verandah.

He had lost some of his weight and there was a new pallor around his lips. You have grown fat and very dark. You resemble a gypsy, said Carlo, laughing. What did you want me to do, he asked me. I don't know, I said....

That week, a famous novelist visiting India, arrived in Calcutta and as he was related to my husband, a cousin arranged a cocktail party for him on the lawn for which I had to go along. The writer had spent the whole day with me, lunching and drinking bottles of chilled beer and by evening I had a severe headache, but I liked parties, especially those with writers strutting around and I joined in, most happily, but there was a mischievous cousin who coaxed me in affectionate tones to drink more and more, so that I soon became quite drunk and dizzy.

And still the man kept telling me that he would feel insult-

ed if I refused the drink he himself had mixed for me. Sister-in-law, you look lovely when you are drunk, he said and laughing a great deal, I gulped down another long drink. My eyes burned like torches and like a fishing boat a laugh moved about, drifting in the dusk of my veins. When I climbed into my car finally taking leave of them all, what was left of my commonsense told me that I ought not to return home to my children looking like a tramp.

So I went to the hotel where Carlo was staying and in the lift, seeing my red face glowing like the red moon of an eclipse, I felt frightened and unsteady but once inside Carlo's room, he carried me up to the bed and wiped my face with wet towels, smelling of eau de cologne. What has happened to you, he asked me, who has put you in this horrible state....

Oh Carlo, Oh Carlo, I am so miserable, I said and sobbed aloud, holding tight his two hands in mine. Get up my darling, he said, get up and tidy up your hair, I shall take you home.

Parting at the door, Carlo said, you pick up innocence as you go along ... and then alone, seated on the verandah ledge, unable to sleep and troubled with remorse and shame, I thought of his words which seemed meaningless to me at that time. There was not one star visible in the sky.

37

For the first time I saw the eunuchs dance in Calcutta

He talks turning a sun-stained
Cheek to me, his mouth, a dark
Cavern, where stalactites of
Uneven teeth gleam, his right
Hand on my knee, while our minds
Are willed to race towards love;
But they only wander, tripping
Idly over puddles of
Desire...Can this man with
Nimble finger-tips unleash
Nothing more alive than the
Skin's lazy hungers ? Who can
Help us who have lived so long
And have failed in love ? The heart,
An empty cistern, waiting
Through long hours, fills itself
With coiling snakes of silence.
I am a freak. It's only
To save my face, I flaunt, at
Times, a grand, flamboyant lust.

In the year 1963 I won the P.E.N's Asian Poetry Prize, and had for the first time in my life a bank account of mine from which in two days time I withdrew almost half the amount for outfitting myself. I have always ignored the fashions, being fully aware of their disability to help me look chic, but I have wanted to dress aesthetically.

I grew fond of lungis with floral prints and shirts of black poplin that concealed the heaviness of my upper torso. I liked strands of red beads and red glass bangles. I disliked the foreign perfumes with their alcoholic base but liked to pour attar in my bath-water. Instead of soap I used the powdered bark of the Vaka tree which had an abrasive action on the skin.

I had an oily skin which made me look younger than my years. This endeared me to old men who were weary of sophisticated ladies and the fragrances of their elaborate toilet. I was drawn to old people, for they seemed harmless and they had charm. They smelt clean. They knew how to put a girl at ease just by paying her a simple compliment.

One of the old ones who used to visit our family on Sundays had a face that resembled Stan Laurel's, and I was very fond of him. He made me laugh, clowning in our verandah, and with mimicry that delighted my sons. He used to take us out when my husband was out, touring, and get us ice-cream, chocolates and carry us to little restaurants, full of smoke and twilight.

We were grateful for the outings, for nobody else did bother about us. My husband was too busy to think of taking us out anywhere and he was not exactly rich either. This old man used to plant kisses on my cheeks leaving us at the door; slobbering kisses that had to be washed out in a hurry, and yet I was guilty of encouraging him because I wanted someone to take my little sons out and give them a good time. When he once brought me a pornographic book wrapped in brown paper, I decided to end the friendship. No reasons were given. He was shrewd enough to guess them.

Then there were the men who were either connected with my husband's occupation or were at one time my father's friends, the ones I used to call "Uncle" from infancy, who had changed to such an extent that they gave me lecherous hugs from behind doors and leered at me while their wives were away. I hated them. Often I told my husband that we ought to run away from Calcutta and its corrupting atmosphere. But he paid no heed.

Poets, even the most insignificant of them, are different from other people. They cannot close their shops like shopmen and return home. Their shop is their mind and as long as they carry it with them they feel the pressures and the torments. A poet's raw material is not stone or clay; it is her personality. I could not escape from my predicament even for a moment. I was emotional and over-sensitive. Whenever a snatch of unjustified scandal concerning my emotional life reached me through well-meaning relatives I wept like a wounded child for hours, rolling on my bed and often took sedatives to put myself to sleep.

When my mental stability weakened, some friends encouraged me to drink heavily, taking me to their houses equipped with bars, and, drunk, I was a great entertainer holding forth on the exalted subjects of divine love and nirvana. How they must have laughed to hear my talks ! I do not have the faintest recollection, fortunately, of those lost hours when I was a puppet at the mercy of gross men and women.

And yet Calcutta gifted me with beautiful sights which built for me the sad poems that I used to write in my diary in those days. It was at Calcutta that I saw for the first time the eunuchs' dance. It was at Calcutta that I first saw a prostitute, gaudily painted like a cheap bazar toy. It was at Calcutta that I saw the ox-carts moving along the Strand Road early in the morning with proud heavy-turbaned men, their tattooed wives with fat babies dozing at their breasts like old drunkards in clubs at lonely hours.

We had a blue Ambassador car and an old driver named Ramzan who used to drive me once a week to the Free School Street where there was a book-shop that sold first editions. I picked up some gilded volumes of Lawrence Hope from that shop and presented them to the man I used to be infatuated with, but he was so conventional, so cowardly that he went out immediately to buy in return two volumes of Stefan Zweig to return the favour, to be neatly 'quits'. He was so afraid of being seen with me that he always dragged his wife along whenever he came to call on us and I pitied her when I saw how bored she was with our kind of conversation.

Finally I became wiser, understood what my grandmother meant when she talked about breeding and left off pestering the man. Wasn't Carlo better bred than the man who did not know how to accept a gift graciously ? In desperation I turned to my friend. You do not love me at all, said Carlo, I am only a waiting room between trains....

But he offered himself as a stiff drink, he offered to help me forget and in the afternoons. I lay in his white arms, drowsily aware that he was only water, only a pale green pond glimmering in the sun. In him I swam, all broken with longing, in his robust blood I floated, drying on my tears. Carlo reminded me of the pond at Nalapat where I used to lie sunning my face and my growing limbs. He reminded me of the ancient Neermatala tree which had at one time a string hammock tied onto its branches where I lay listening to the gentle sounds of the summer afternoons....

38

Delhi streets were fragrant & murky... I felt very young

Delhi :
Our house crouches in dust in the
Evenings when the buffaloes tramp
Up the road, the weary herdsmen
Singing soft Punjabi songs, and
Girls from free municipal schools
Pause shyly at our gate and smile.
What have I to offer them but
My smile, a half-dead, fraudulent
Thing. what have I to offer at
This shrine of peace. but my constant,
Complaining voice ? Forgive us. We
Are paltry creatures, utter snobs,
Who disowned our mothers only
Because their hands, we noticed, were
Work-worn, and so to seek richer
Mothers and better addresses
We must move on, and on, until
We too, some day, by our children
May be disowned....

When my husband was sent to Delhi and to the Planning Commission on a three years' deputation, I thought that I would enjoy the change of scene. I had not travelled much. But my husband had always held jobs that entailed tours and on his return from any unfamiliar place, I pestered him with questions.

What was the colour of the sky, what was the vegetation, how did the natives dress, what was the tune of their dialect... and, always he furnished me with details that went into the build-up of a locale for yet another story.

When we reached Delhi, we stayed for three days at the Reserve Bank's Visiting Officers' Flat at Rabindra Nagar which was cooled by a desert cooler and by the high hedges skirting the lawn. There were flowers on the dining table and uniformed servants to serve us.

On the fourth day we moved into the littlest flat at Defence Colony, where we had no room at all to entertain friends who came to call on us. There was a spiral staircase that took us to a tiny balcony where we had placed two cane chairs. Beyond that was a room full of our furniture and books where we sat to eat hasty meals. The bathroom contained no water, except at six in the morning for fifteen minutes. Our cook and driver had to sleep on packing cases laid out on the back verandah. The children were admitted to a school in the last term, after our convincing the principal that the boys had high I.Qs.

I had a landlady who used to come silently into the flat to spy on us and our activities, an old lady with a disarming smile. I was miserable in that house for I had cultivated from childhood the habit of taking two baths every day and with a dry faucet, all I could do was change my clothes twice and sponge my body as though I were a sick woman. I shall die if I live here for a full month, I told my husband.

During the first week, we received a telegram from my brother which informed us that my father had collapsed with a heart attack. I took the first flight home and reached Calicut as soon as I could, to find my father lying drugged and unshaven on his bed in the corridor facing the terrace. When he recognized me, he wept with emotion. For a month I stayed near him, sleeping on the terrace on a mattress laid out on the floor and looked after him, serving him soups and fruit-juice. I had once picked up for a rupee a second-hand book called "How to make Hundred Delicious Soups" and it was easy for me to make soups of any kind after having memorized the book.

When my father was well enough to walk about in the house, I went back to Delhi and then we moved into a flat at Lajpat Nagar, which had cactii growing near the walls and a little iron gate that creaked. Beyond the house was an open space of an acre which separated our place from the slums. Here the buffaloes used to graze all day long, snorting at intervals and coming to our house to rub their noses against the rough surface of the walls.

Seated on the steps leading to the flat, I could watch the slum dwellers cook their meals bending over sigrees and the blue charcoal smoke rising...But almost every day, in one or other of the huts, somebody died and there was loud wailing. Then the dead body was taken out on a charpoy and carried away to some place far away, while the relatives walked behind, wailing flatly and monotonously as only the poor and the absolutely hopeless know how to wail.

During this time my eldest son Monoo fell ill with a fever that was later diagnosed as typhoid. I was panicky. Was it what the slum dwellers had given him this seed of death ? I told my husband that I was going to back to my home in Malabar and live there peacefully with my children. Delhi was so full of dust and bacteria !

To escape from our place in Lajpat Nagar, I went in the evenings to the Planning Commission to pick up my husband and on my way, saw the leaves being burnt on the sides of the Aurangzeb Road and the smell of that smoke soothed my nerves. The Delhi roads are the most beautiful roads that I have ever seen, for they are shaded by large trees and are cool and black. The names are beautiful too. I used to pass through a road named Soneri Bagh Road only because the name appealed to me. I envied those who had their bungalows near such roads who breathed in the acrid smoke of burning leaves at autumn time.

Then with the help of a friend we managed to get a better flat at South Extension, a flat on the first floor, which we reached climbing a staircase wrapped in bougainvillae, and the fragrant Rangoon Creeper. We had as our landlord a youthful romantic person who used to come visiting us with his wife,

who was warm as homemade bread and made me feel at ease with her kind words. At that time I was pregnant for the third time.

I had picked up a handful of friends in Delhi who were well-read and intellectual. Whenever I felt well enough to go out, one of them took me out to some play, a foreign film or an art exhibition, or if we had the money we went to Kwality and ate the biggest sundae. I was particularly fond of a drama critic, a young man who resembled Mark Antony in his looks and although he was younger than I, he became my best friend, a friend I could count on when I needed an escort.

My husband was fond of him too. Whenever I looked depressed or bored, my husband asked me to take the young man and go for a stroll. Once the two of us took a three wheeled scooter and went for a noisy, jerky drive to the Defence Colony. He took me to La Boheme and gave me Chinese tea which tasted like plain boiled water to me, but I pretended to have had an acquaintance with it, long before he bought it for me.

After the La Boheme treat, he took me for a drive and we had cider, sipping it straight from the bottle during the fast drive, and it was dusk, and all the Delhi streets were fragrant and murky. I felt very young, very lovely and delightfully carefree...

39

Calicut gets a good crop of lunatics

It was again the time of rain and on
Every weeping tree the lush moss spread like
Eczema, and from beneath the swashy
Earth the fat worms surfaced to explode
Under rain. It rained on the day my son
Was born, a slanting rain that began with
The first labour pain and kept me
Company, sighing, wailing, and roaring
When I groaned so that I smiled and stopped my
Plaints to hear its grief. I felt then that
Only the selfish had fears, that only
The unloving felt pain and then the first
Tinge of blood seemed like another dawn
Breaking. For a while I too was earth.
In me the seed was silent, waiting as
A baby does for the womb's quiet
Expulsion. This then was my destiny.
Walk into the waiting room, I had cried,
When once my heart was vacant, fill the
Emptiness, stranger, fill it with a child.
Love is not important that makes the blood
Carouse, nor the man who brands you with his
Lust, but is shed as slough at end of each
Embrace. Only that matters which forms as
Toadstool under lightning and rain, the soft
Stir in womb, the foetus growing, for
Only the treasures matter that were washed
Ashore, not the long blue tides that washed them
In. When rain stopped and the light was gay on our
Casuarina leaves, it was early
Afternoon. And, then, wailing into light
He came, so fair, a streak of light thrust

Into the faded light. They raised him
To me then, proud Jaisurya, my son,
Separated from darkness that was mine
And in me. The darkness I have known,
Lived with, The darkness of rooms where the old
Sit, sharpening words for future use,
The darkness of sterile wombs and that of
The miser's pot, with the mildew on his coins.
Out of the mire of a moonless night was
He born, Jaisurya, my son, as out of
The wrong is born the right and out of night
The sundrenched golden day....

In the seventh month of my pregnancy I went to Calicut to be with my parents for the delivery and the lying in. This I did with reluctance for I was not accustomed to stay away from my sons for more than a week or two.

At that time my parents lived in a dimlit house on the outskirts of the town. The walls on either side of the gate had turned black with lichen and it was possible to catch sight of the snakes that lived in their many crevices, sticking their crusty heads out to hiss at the passers-by. Lining the walls were the hibiscus plants with their rugged roots and the blood-red flowers.

Often a mad girl named Narayani came up to the gate and grinned at me, mumbling afterwards of hunger. She had broken teeth that ended in points.

There was yet another lunatic, an old woman called Ammalu Amma who tried to flatter us into giving her clothes and rice. The worst of the beggars was a pale woman in her thirties who came silently carrying a dirty bundle tucked under an arm and who began to rile us in the most pornographic language after finishing her lunch. The servants used to drive her out but she remained near the gate, shouting of the misdeeds of men who were worse than dogs. She used to draw large crowds with her oratory.

Calicut gets a good crop of lunatics in the summer months

probably due to the heat of the roads and the dust rising from under the wheels. The town burns with the fever of that merciless season. All the wells dry up. The frail varieties of vegetation die out. Only the weeds survive the heat, and the hardy hibiscus.

I was afraid to step out of the house alone. I watched the road, seated behind the flowered curtain of my room which was cool as the shaded interior of a forest with dark teakwood furniture and a dresser with a large mirror, oval-shaped, in which I surveyed the convexity of my body with pride.

One morning I woke with pain and realized that I was about to have the child. Our friend, Dr. Vimala Nayar came immediately to take me in her car to the hospital. I saw the sky pale and heard the chill winds whistling into my ears and wondered if it was going to rain.

At the hospital I was put on the table in the delivery room where, to distract my mind from the spasms of pain, I recited the Gayatri mantra, and while the sun grew in my eyes, filling my veins with its warmth I felt the baby slide along my thigh and heard its loud cry. "It is a beautiful son," cried Vimala.

My mother lifted the baby from her hands and put him on my bosom and I blessed him with long life, kissing the damp crown of his head and called him Jaisurya. That was the only naming ceremony that he ever had. He was big and lovely with thick hair and long eyelashes. There was no room available for me at the hospital that evening, and so the little one and I slept on a makeshift bed laid out for us in the back verandah near the lavatories and the garbage-pails filled with blood-stained pads.

It rained throughout that night and to protect the baby my sister and I lay on our sides making with our bodies a shelter for him. I could not sleep for a minute, for the cold winds blew on me, giving me cramps and making me wretched. I compared the new boy's fate with those of my elder sons' and felt pity for him. The others had been born inside the home,

and there had been my grandmother to provide us with warmth. That night I missed my dead grandmother.

In the morning my father arrived and took me home, seeing my misery. But the misery did not end there. At home they were preparing to give away in marriage my younger sister and all through the day relatives and friends came to spread goodwill around, and instead of sitting in the drawing room they deposited themselves on my bed or around it and deprived me of privacy so that I found myself not being able to change my blood-stained clothes, nurse the hungry baby or go to sleep.

The stream of visitors stopped their flow only at midnight. I became miserable like a trapped animal. My breasts overflowed with milk, and yet I was shy to untie my blouse and let my son suck at them. In pain and in misery I waited for the first chance to be alone so that I might lock the door. But when it came and I locked the door my parents were terrified. They thought that I was going mad. They banged on my door.

Open the door, shouted the relatives. What are you doing there alone with the baby ? I was in frenzy like a tigress that feared for the safety of its cub. I held my baby to my breast and shouted back at the people outside my door, I shall never open the door . . . .

Then my elder brother was called in and he softened his voice to request me to come out. I am your brother, he said, tell me what is troubling you. And I opened the door to cling to his shoulder and sob. He took me to his little cottage where my sister-in-law gave me the best room and made me comfortable.

When the baby was three-weeks-old, I returned to my home in Delhi and at the airport in the early morning my husband stood with outstretched arm to receive the littlest of our sons. He was shown to the elder sons at lunch time and each of them touched his pink toes with awe and a measure of tenderness. My husband decided to call the new comer Shodoo, and because my health had failed he took charge of his needs, made the formula in the mornings, filled eight bottles with it and

placed it in the fridge taking out one and heating it when the baby cried for milk.

We engaged a stout sardarni to look after him in the day-time. She called him Kaka and threw him up in the air to make him laugh. This game frightened us very much. But she was kind to me and persisted in massaging my legs even when I did not fancy any kind of massage.

40

Like the phoenix I rose from the ashes of my past

I shall some day leave, leave the cocoon
You built around me with morning tea,
Love-words flung from doorways and of course
Your tired lust. I shall some day take
Wings, fly around, as often petals
Do, when free in air, and you dear one,
Just the sad remnant of a root, must
Lie behind, sans pride, on double beds
And grieve. But I shall some day return, losing
Nearly all, hurt by wind, sun and rain,
Too hurt by fierce happiness to want
A further jaunt or a further spell
Of freedom, and I shall some day see
My world, de-fleshed, de-veined, de-blooded,
Just a skeletal thing, then shut my
Eyes and take refuge, if nowhere else,
Here in your nest of familiar scorn....

After my return to Delhi I found my health declining. The right side of my abdomen ached dully and constantly. I coughed throughout the night. I could not retain even the blandest food. The nausea drove me to my bed where I lay looking older than my years. I could not heave myself out of bed even to receive visitors who came to see the child.

My constant companion realized with pain that I could no longer go out with him for a walk or to see a film. Do you hate me, he asked me one day, standing at the foot of the stairs. I

was dazed with fatigue and pain. I could not speak at all. What has happened to you, Amy, he asked me. He left our house with moist eyes. Very soon I was lying in the Wellington Hospital, seriously ill.

Fortunately for me I had at that time in Delhi a friend who was probably the most loving of women in the country. Her name was Shirley. She had long brown hair, which she always wore in a thick plait, and an innocent smile. She visited me at the hospital every day to change my clothes and help me to wash my hair. She thrust a large basin under the bed and while I lay still she shampooed my hair. I wanted to cut it short but she disagreed with me. You are going to get well, she said. If God wished you to die so soon he would not have given you the gift of a beautiful baby, she said, and this argument soothed me.

My feet had become rigid and numb with the long illness and Shirley rubbed cold cream gently on them to soften the skin. I wept with gratitude. Off and on, Shirley rushed up to the window to look out. What are you looking at so intently, I asked her, but she did not answer. Later, when I was able to move about, I saw from my window the red morgue to which the dead were taken, all wrapped in white.

Often I heard from different parts of the hospital women moaning, grieving over the death of some relative. At that precise moment Shirley would come to me and tell me that a child had fallen and hurt himself slightly and that the moaning was his. "Sleep, Amy," she would whisper, "go back to sleep." I wanted to live for a few more years and be able to see my little son play about on the green lawn. I prayed fervently for recovery promising my God that I would live an exemplary life if he spared me.

During my stay in Delhi I used to write regularly for the journal named *The Century* which was run by the late Mr. V.K. Krishna Menon. My parents had met him and had perhaps known him but I had not, until the day he came to see me at the hospital. I had earlier heard of his arrogance from the young men who lived on the periphery of his social circle.

One of them told me that he had wanted to take me to Mr. Menon, but the former minister had asked him why he should meet this Kamala Das or any other writer for that matter. This story had hardened my heart against Mr. Menon, but when he visited me, scolding the nurses for not being more careful and wiped my damp forehead himself with a corner of a towel I was astonished at my discovery. He had not made it known to any that he was kind-hearted.

I had lost during that illness the resemblance to anything human. I looked like a moulting bird. My skin had turned dark and scaly. My voice had thinned to a whisper. When the hospital finally discharged me, Shirley's brother-in-law wrapped me in a rug and carried me up the stairs to deposit me on a clean bed. My little son was frightened of my looks and burst out crying. My second son tried for several days to rub mustard oil on my scaly legs to make me look normal again.

Like the phoenix, I rose from the ashes of my past. I forgot the promises that I had made to God and became once more intoxicated with life. My lips had without rest uttered the sweet name of Lord Krishna while I lay ill, but when I recovered my health I painted them up with pink lipstick. On moonlit nights once again I thought wistfully of human love...

Then we moved into a house in Man Nagar where, even in the hot summer, the desert cooler churning up the frothy air chilled by the water and the khus screen, made us reach out for our blankets at night. Leaving the South Extension house had deprived us of two warm-hearted friends, Professor Thapar and Sukrita Luthra, who were both very kind to us. The professor used to visit us in the evenings and sit on our verandah holding our naked baby close to his chest, and discussing war-strategy which was his pet subject. Mrs. Luthra was our landlady and was an adopted sister of mine who pacified my baby whenever it cried out for no apparent reason.

At Man Nagar my life became very happy. In front of our house was a piece of dark green lawn bordered with flowering hedges. Crossing the road we could reach the lush green of the Lody Gardens where, beyond the tombs of Ibrahim Lody and

Sikander Lody stretched a pond, half hidden by the water lilies. We went to the Lody Gardens to walk my son under its trees. My second son picked the red berries that had fallen on the ground.

I was wanted in those days, loved as men love their women, but I yearned for a change, a new life. I was looking for an ideal lover. I was looking for the one who went to Mathura and forgot to return to his Radha. Perhaps I was seeking the cruelty that lies in the depths of a man's heart. Otherwise why did I not get my peace in the arms of my husband ? Subconsciously I hoped for the death of my ego. I was looking for an executioner whose axe would cleave my head into two. The ones who loved me did not understand why I was restive. You are like a civet cat in a cage, said a friend of mine looking at me walk up and down biting my nails. Take some gin, he said. It will quiet your nerves. You are always dissatisfied, cried my husband. Only I can understand you, said my Italian friend, come away with me...

41

I withdrew into the cave I had made for myself

They did this to her, the men who know her, the man
She loved, who loved her not enough, being selfish
And a Coward, the husband who neither loved nor
Used her, but was a ruthless watcher, and the band
Of cynics she turned to, clinging to their chests where
New hair sprouted like great-winged moths, burrowing her
Face into their smells and their young lusts to forget,
To forget, oh, to forget, and, they said, each of
Them, I do not love, I cannot love, it is not
In my nature to love, but I can be kind to you.
They let her slide from pegs of sanity into
A bed made soft with tears, and she lay there weeping,
For sleep had lost its use. I shall build walls with tears,
She said, walls to shut me in. Her husband shut her
In, every morning, locked her in a room of books
With a streak of sunshine lying near the door, like
A yellow cat, to keep her company, but soon
Winter came, and one day while locking her in, he
Noticed that the cat of sunshine was only a
Line, a half-thin line, and in the evening when
He returned to take her out, she was a cold and
Half dead woman, now of no use at all to men.

In Delhi, the winter is full of enchantment. The sun falls over the city gently like a sliver of butter on a piece of toast.

Everything smells of that white, kind sun, not the grass alone or the berries fallen from the trees, but the children with their red cheeks roughened by the night's chill and the young men drinking cona coffee at the Coffee House waiting for their current

lovers to join them. Even the Tibetan bronzes at Janpath laid out in front of the Imperial Hotel, smell not of their metal, but of the sun.

I used to walk my baby to the Khan Market, not taking the normal route, the quiet street outside, but running across the grass that grew unkempt between the houses of Man Nagar, and once there, I went to admire the books at Fakir Chands, where the younger man was full of courtesy and friendliness. His wife was very beautiful.

He knew that I hardly ever had the money to purchase all the books I lovingly picked up to smell their new jackets, but he was patient with me. Once, when my father was expected at Delhi for a short stay, I wandered round the Khan Market trying to find a walking stick and Fakir Chand went into his house and got for me as a gift one of his father's sticks. This is one of the most unforgettable incidents that happened during our stay in Delhi.

My children used to eat a lot of ice-cream every day. The baby used to wear in those days a navy blue cardigan which was a perfect foil for his pink complexion. I walked proud as the Virgin Mary, holding my baby by his chubby hand.

At that time my eldest son was fifteen. He told me one day while we were all relaxing on the grass, that he wanted to go steady with a girl. There were no secrets between us. He said that he wanted a beautiful girl, preferably a blonde with blue eyes. His ideas of feminine beauty were derived from the comics he had been reading from his childhood. I thought it a tall order. But as though in answer to my prayers, a girl with ash blonde hair stood on my doorstep the next morning.

She had come with a young girl who used to frequent my house. This is Anna, said the Indian girl, she is from West Germany. From that day onwards, she was my son's special friend. They remained on the terrace of our house talking of French literature and Marxism. Anna was the most brilliant girl who had walked into my house.

For Monoo, it was his first adolescent love. When the girl went for a week to Calcutta on a sightseeing tour with her aunts,

Monoo asked us to send him with her, but my husband told him that he could not possibly waste money on encouraging a puppy-love. Monoo in despair took all his comics, the collection of a life-time, and sold them to a second-hand dealer and made enough money to travel to Calcutta by third class. On the way he trembled in the severe cold, until a labourer, taking pity on him, gave him a beedi to smoke. On his return he told me of all those discomforts with a smile that made me feel proud of him.

You have spoilt your son for good, said my husband. This love for a gentle and brilliant girl transformed Monoo into a full-fledged intellectual. He read far into the night and wrote faintly political articles which some journals began to publish. When my husband was transferred back to Bombay, Monoo was heartbroken. After a couple of months, Anna went back to Germany to continue with her education. For a year or two they corresponded, but then each found other diversions in their respective countries. But the maturity that Anna had given him remained, to become a part of my son.

In Bombay, we were led to a flat owned by the Reserve Bank at Cadell Road. It was on the ground floor and had broken window panes through which the cold winds blew from the Arabian sea, which was only a few yards away. At the time of the high tide, the sea came thumping against the wall that separated our house from the beach, which was mouldy and fetid with the rotting garbage washed ashore.

None walked there in the evenings except some lovers who had no money to go anywhere else for their love-making and a few loafers who hoped to snatch a gold chain or a purse from the couples in the dark. My eldest son took me for walks in the evening along the sea-shore, and a Bengali family mistook us to be lovers. He had grown tall and intense looking. Seeing us together, nobody would have guessed that we were mother and son.

At night, the sea rushed noisily through my veins, giving me chronic insomnia. All I could do was sit at the dining table and write poetry. I wrote until it was five and the milkman

clanked at the gate, with his cycle and his pails. Then I went to lie near my husband and my child.

Finally, fearing that I would go mad there, I persuaded my husband to shift to a place in Churchgate. This was another of the many buildings owned by the Reserve Bank of India. This stood between the sprawling Sachivalaya and the Esso Park where the children arrived in the evenings with their ayahs to play in the grass. We made friends with our neighbours, the Deshmukhs, the Menons and the Vaz family.

Wherever a writer goes, her notoriety precedes her. The non-writers do not normally trust the writers. This is because they are entirely dissimilar, except in appearance. The mind being an invisible limb, is not taken into consideration. Even birds have their own particular heights. The land birds who do not rise far into the lonely sky, often wonder why the eagles fly high, why they go round and round like ballerinas.

The essence of the writer eludes the non-writer. All that the writer reveals to such people are her oddities of dress and her emotional excesses. Finally, when the muscles of the mind have picked up enough power to read people's secret thoughts, the writer shies away from the invisible hostility and clings to her own type, those dreaming ones, born with a fragment of wing still attached to a shoulder.

As I wrote more and more, in the circles I was compelled to move in, I became lonelier and lonelier. I felt that my loneliness was like a red brand on my face. In company when there were dinners at any friend's house, I sat still as a statue, feeling the cruel vibrations all around me. Then my husband realized my plight and stopped taking me out anywhere.

I withdrew into the cave I had made for myself where I wrote stories and poems and became safe and anonymous. There were books all round me, but no friend to give me well-meaning advice, no relative telling me of my discrediting my family-name, by my unconventional ways of thinking....

42

The last of my lovers : handsome dark one with a tattoo between his eyes

The Beginning of Autumn :
She floats in her autumn,
Yellowed like a leaf
And free.

Autumn is the season for yellowing. When I entered middle age with reluctance, I found to my dismay that my body's contours had changed, although imperceptibly. My skin had turned gross.

In the morning I was used to picking up my glasses from my dresser and glancing at the reflection of my face in the mirror. At that hour my face seemed the freshest. It was as if the gentle nights and all their dreams had cast a golden bloom over my face, a fall of dew to damp my skin. But after thirty-five, there were seldom any dreams at all in my sleep and the face that I saw in the glass appeared merely haggard.

What was happening to me, I wondered. Was it no longer possible to lure a charming male into a complicated and satisfying love affair with the right words, the right glances. the right gestures ? Was I finished as a charmer ? Then with the force of a typhoon he conquered me, the last of my lovers, the most notorious of all, the king of all kings, the bison among animals, the handsome dark one with a tattoo between his eyes.

He was coming out of a cloth shop at Churchgate and I was

walking in. His face was familiar to me. I stared at him in fascination. There were several stories circulating about his innumerable love affairs and his sexual prowess. In my eyes he was a magnificent animal.

He turned back again and again to see why I stared so hard at him. I did not resemble any of the usual nymphomaniacs, probably because I was never one. Having an active brain, I did not have the round, glassy, flowerlike face that normally appeals to a libertine. I was plain, very brown and I did not like coquetry. He must have put my face out of his mind immediately.

In the month of October, a friend of ours who was celebrating a birthday, forced me to drink a gimlet with the rest of the ladies present, and within an hour I felt dizzy and ill. When I reached home, I collapsed on my bed with a temperature of 105 degrees. Next morning, the fever remained high to puzzle my doctor who put me on penicillin immediately. I was well enough to read books lying in my bed, wrapped in a blanket.

My friend Nissim Ezekiel visited me, spent the day in my room reading the paperbacks strewn all over my bed and sharing the glasses of fruit juice with me. Nissim is an ideal companion for any sick person. He is kind and gentle. He does not speak loud enough to harm the nerves of the hearer.

After ten days of illness, my blood was examined and it was found to contain too many leucocytes. The doctor was worried. The specialist who was called in, showed anxiety. Could it be Leukaemia ? They removed me to the Bombay Hospital an hour before our lunchtime. I did not bid farewell to my child who was playing in the next room. From the car that took me to the hospital I studied the roads and the landmarks in order to be able to return as a ghost, after death, to my home, to be with my children. I believed that I was going to die.

The room that I was allotted was painted green and had green drapes. It had an airconditioner. It resembled an under water cabin. There was a dresser painted in white and an extra bed for any relative who wished to keep the patient company. I crept under the sheets and fell asleep. Dr. Goyal was

the honorary chosen to cure me. He wore every day a new shiny suit and a bow tie. He assured me that I was going to be all right.

In the adjacent room was a little child suffering from Meningitis who uttered harsh bird-cries intermittently. It was an unforgettable sound. He had a private nurse who crept into my room occasionally to peer into my face and nod her head in sympathy. Leukaemia is not curable, she said. I can lend you my magazines. She brought me two issues of *True Confessions* which were full of pictures.

I asked her why the child's parents were not around to comfort him. She laughed a mirthless laugh. They are rich people, she said, they will not be able to sleep in the hospital.... All through that night I heard the shrill cry of the child but a little before drawn I fell asleep. When I woke up the cry had stopped, but there were the swishy sounds of cleaning coming from his room, the mop beating against the wet floor and the bucket being dragged. The private nurse entered my room to take away her magazines. The child expired at four, she said, my duty is over, I must go.

Every morning the boys from the laboratory on the first floor woke me up at six shouting for my blood. Khoon, khoon, they shouted, pushing their trays and trolleys and switching on all the bright lights. After the blood was taken they sent their henchmen to collect in jam bottles the urine, the bowel movement and the sputum. I was wheeled often to the dark X'ray room where the attendant gently removed my upper clothes and laid me out on the long table under the machine. The fever remained with me. My brother and my sister, both doctors of considerable merit, were called to Bombay. My lung had an abscess, my liver had an abscess and something had gone wrong with my heart.

And, yet, my husband who had never read a medical book in all his life, told me that I was going to get well. My room's number was 565. It proved to be lucky for me. I surprised the doctors and the various specialists by recovering fully. I was taken from the hospital to the airport and put inside a plane that was flying to Delhi. The idea was to keep me in my bro-

ther's house for a period of observation. One night I vomited a mass of green, resembling tangled seaweeds, and afterwards felt completely cured.

Health has its own anointments. When I recovered from my serious illness, I grew attractive once again. Then at the airport I collided with the elderly man who had once fascinated me just by turning back to glance darkly at me. I had heard of his fabulous lusts. He drew me to him as a serpent draws its dazed victim. I was his slave. That night I tossed about in my bed thinking of his dark limbs and of his eyes glazed with desire. Very soon we met and fell I into his arms.

You are my Krishna, I whispered kissing his eyes shut. He laughed. I felt that I was a virgin in his arms. Was there a summer before the autumn of his love ? Was there a dawn before the dusk of his skin ? I did not remember. I carried him with me inside my eyelids, the dark God of girlhood dreams. At night from the lush foxholes of the city, his concubines wailed for him. Oh Krishna, oh Kanhaiya, do not leave me for another.

I wrote him letters when I could not meet him. He hated such letters. Do not get sentimental, he said. Don't write silly letters.... I should have gone away from him immediately. But I stayed near him, smuggling against his hairless chest, burrowing my tear-stained face into the deep curve of his arm. Each time we parted, I asked him, when I am to meet you again, and combing his iron grey hair, his eyes meeting mine in the glass, he always said, darling, we shall meet after two days...

There were eighteen mirrors in his room, eighteen ponds into which I dipped my hot brown body. Beyond that room was an enclosed verandah where we stood together to look at the sea. The sea was our only witness. How many times I turned to it and whispered, oh, sea, I am at last in love, I have found my Krishna....

43

"I too tried adultery for a short while"

You planned to tame a swallow, to hold her
In the long summer of your love so that she would forget
Not the raw seasons alone, and the homes left behind, but
Also her nature, the urge to fly, and the endless
Pathways of the sky. It was not to gather knowledge
Of yet another man that I came to you but to learn
What I was, and by learning, to learn to grow, but every lesson
You gave was about yourself. You were pleased
With my body's response, its weather, its usual shallow
Convulsions. You dribbled spittle into my mouth, you poured
Yourself into every nook and cranny, you embalmed
My poor lust with your bitter-sweet juices. You called me wife,
I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and
To offer at the right moment the vitamins. Cowering
Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and
Became a dwarf. I lost my will and reason, to all your
Questions I mumbled incoherent replies. The summer
Begins to pall. I remember the ruder breezes
Of the fall and the smoke from burning leaves. Your room is
Always lit by artificial lights, your windows always
Shut. Even the airconditioner helps so little,
All pervasive is the male scent of your breath. The cut flowers
In the vases have begun to smell of human sweat. There is
No more singing, no more a dance, my mind is an old
Playhouse with all its lights put out. The strong man's technique is
Always the same, he serves his love in lethal doses,
For love is Narcissus at the water's edge, haunted
By its own lonely face, and yet it must seek at last
An end, a pure and total freedom, it must will the mirrors
To shatter, and the kind night to erase the water....

Like the majority of city-dwelling women, I too tried adultery for a short while, but I found it distasteful. My lover had entered the decline of his career and aroused in me, more than love, a strong sense of pity.

His admirers were keeping away. His phone was silent. No favours were asked. He wore the sad aura of a king in exile. I wanted to offer my life to him, but it was only a tarnished trophy and perhaps worthless. There was only one arbour left for him, the snuggery between strong limbs and for his weary eyes, the pink blindness against my pores.

Even while I held him close to my body, he muttered, I see the reds rise like a rash, the gates fall open, the walls crumble, all laws get trampled in the dust, but I am powerless to do anything for this country.... When we embraced, we fell in the cerulean pools of his many mirrors as a deathless motif, repeating and repeating, the reflection of a reflection, the shadow of a shadow, the dream of a dream, and yet I hated the exploitation of my body. The silly female shape had again intervened to ruin a beautiful relationship, the clumsy gadgetry that always, always, damaged bonds.

I asked myself sadly, must my body always ride the gentler, wiser mind ! Then in what I once hated, I discovered beauty. Oh, the moments of his stillness and the fast flutter of his breath! And the silence that healed for a while the ancient bruises of the soul. His body became my prison. I could not see behind it. His darkness blinded me and his love-words shut out the wise world's din.

Years after all of it had ended, I asked myself why I took him on as my lover, fully aware of his incapacity to love and I groped in my mind for the right answers. Love has a beginning and an end, but lust has no such faults. I needed security, I needed permanence, I needed two strong arms thrown around my shoulders and a soft voice in my ear. Physical integrity must carry with it a certain pride that is a burden to the soul. Perhaps it was necessary for my body to defile itself in many ways, so that the soul turned humble for a change.

It was a humbler woman who finally rose from his pleasure-

couch and walked away, not turning once to say goodbye. making up my mind as swiftly as I had made up my physical responses. It was a game in which he was going to lose heavily. I did not believe in receiving any gift that was not abstract. I wanted to grow in him like cancer, I wanted him to suffer from incurable love. This cruelty is typical of women when they are in love. He said you are a mad girl, but long live your madness ...

Yes, it is true that I loved him. Not madly as he thought I did, but sanely, guided both by the wisdom of my body and by that of my mind. At the first touch of his body, all my past infatuations were obliterated. It was as if his dark body was the only body left alive. All the other deaths were silent; no requiems were sung for those love affairs. Besides, who had the time to remember anything in that room with the eighteen mirrors ?

City fathers, friends and moralists, if I were a sinner, do not forgive my sin. If I were innocent, do not forgive my innocence. Burn me with torches blood-red in the night, burn my proud Dravidian skin and burn the tumult at the core. Or, bury me in your back garden, fill my crevices with the red dust of Bombay, plant gentle saplings on my belly, for, he and I met too late, we could get no child of our own, my love for him was just the writing of the sea, just a song borne by the wind....

Free from that last of human bondage, I turned to Krishna. I felt that the show had ended and the auditorium was empty. Then He came, not wearing a crown, not wearing make-up, but making a quiet entry. What is the role you are going to play, I asked Him. Your face seems familiar. I am not playing any role, I am myself, He said. In the old playhouse of my mind, in its echoing hollowness, His voice was sweet. He had come to claim me, ultimately. Thereafter He dwelt in my dreams. Often I sat crosslegged before a lamp reciting mantras in His praise.

I lost weight. One day I fell in a heap gasping for breath. Once again I was in Room No. 565 of the Bombay Hospital. My doctor said that there was no cause for alarm. It is only Myocarditis, he said.

After a series of tests, two operations were carried out on my body. When I was getting ready for the more major of the two, my sister sat near me reciting the Durgakavacham. I am not praying for your recovery, she said, I am praying for protection in death if death is to be your destiny. I felt calm and carefree. I tried to picture to myself the form of the glorious Goddess Durga. I saw her in red, resplendent in gem-encrusted jewellery. It was with this vision that I became unconscious on the operating table.

When I woke up after several hours, I saw a lovely face bending over mine. You are Durga, I asked her and she said, yes, but how did you know it was my name.... Later I found out that it was a lady-doctor who was attending on me who was named Durga by her parents but had it changed to Rama after marriage. She did not know that I mistook her for the benign Goddess.

Room No. 565 was familiar to me. It was therefore like a homecoming. My doctors were extra kind. They held my hand and talked to me with affection. There was in particular a young, balding one, who smoked Benson and Hedges and scattered their butts on the floor. I liked the smell his thick fingers left on my hands.

I spent an hour in the morning reciting my prayers. The doctor allowed me to be wheeled every morning to the temple of Krishna where I gazed on that indescribably lovely face in rapture. Isn't it time yet to take me back to you, I asked Him. I had had enough of this earth and all its bitter gifts. My husband thought that I was losing my mind. I was given sedatives and asked to rest in bed for three months. In bed again, I thought of His blueness, His wide eyes and His knowing smile.

I was losing patience. I could not understand the purpose of my return from the hospital or of the resurrection of my health. On some days, seated before the mirror, and painting up my pale lips, I felt all of a sudden uneasy. I saw the lonely eyes reflected in the mirror clouding over as though a mist had enveloped them. I was looking into the depths of my loneliness. Then I felt that I was applying paint on the lips of a

corpse. Death leans against my hedge. My soul fills my body with a certain incense. If death touches me, the fragrance will leave my body and in its place will be an unbearable stench. Even my sons who kiss my cheeks now will then be filled with horror.

When I told my second son that I had planned to return to them as a ghost after my death in the hospital, he said, please don't do that, we shall all be so afraid of you.... His words left me crushed. I was at that moment more ignorant, more naive. I was naive enough to promise my husband that I would return in all the coming births as his wife.

In actuality who is he? Who am I? Who are these three boys who call themselves my children? We are burdened with perishable bodies which strike up bonds which are also unreal, and perishable. The only relationship that is permanent is the one which we form with God. My mate is He. He shall come to me in myriad shapes. In many shapes shall I surrender to His desire. I shall be fondled by Him. I shall be betrayed by Him. I shall pass through all the pathways of this world, condemning none, understanding all and then become part of Him. Then for me there shall be no return journey....

44

I was never a nymphomaniac...

This then was our only inheritance, this ancient
Virus that we nurtured in the soul so
That when at sundown, the Muezzin's high wail sounded from
The mosque, the chapel-bells announced the angelus, and
From the temple rose the Brahmin's assonant chant, we
Walked with hearts grown scabrous with a hate, illogical,
And chose not to believe, what we perhaps vaguely sensed,
That it was only our fathers' lunacy speaking,
In three different tones babbling, slay them who do not
Believe, or better still, disembowel their young ones
And scatter on the streets their meagre innards. Oh God,
Blessed be your fair name, blessed be the religion,
Purified in the unbelievers' blood, blessed be
Our sacred city, blessed be its incarnadined glory....

When the war for the liberation of Bangladesh was going on my eldest son was down with an attack of jaundice. One particularly dark evening, while I was standing on the terrace of our flat, I heard the loud siren begin to wail. I could see the sea beyond the grey buildings looking dark as tar.

For days on end we had been discussing the war and its prospects and I knew that if there was to be a raid on Bombay the Pak planes would enter from the West over the sea, our neighbour. Our house was near the docks. To its left was the sprawling Sachivalaya where the ministers worked on their files and to the right was situated the new Radio and T.V. centre.

What a lark it would be for the Pak bombers to swoop down on us !

The residents of the building had sent to each house a note requesting all to run down the stairs whenever the siren sounded and to huddle themselves near the stairs at the basement. The lift was not to be used for the emergency. So I had anyway decided to stay up in our sixth floor flat with our ailing son and, if need be, die with dignity rather than get crushed like a pack of rodents near the stairs in the basement.

The rest of my family felt that they could not leave us alone, and so all of us made an air-raid shelter in our boxroom, laying a mattress on its floor for the sick one and stocking its shelves with water, loaves of bread, a first-aid kit and a shovel.

When I first heard the siren I remained on the terrace. For a few minutes the city became unnaturally silent. The darkness of the sky seemed damp. There was not one star visible. Then from the north-west rose four red lights. Behind them in a pretty formation arrived a few more red lights. I thought they were the Pak planes. I went in to inform my family that the planes were near at hand. My husband and my second son seemed panic-stricken. Within another minute we heard loud bangs all around us and believed that we were getting bombed.

In those days we had in our drawing room a bronze idol of Ganesh which I worshipped each morning after my bath. I lit the lamp in front of him and sat down to pray. My little son climbed into my lap. The red sindur that I had sprinkled on his golden body seemed like blood to me at that moment. Was my Ganapati a wounded soldier ?

The siren's baby-wail unnerved me. It sounded like a baby crying out in fear. Then I discovered with a jolt that I loved the city of Bombay and did not want it to be hurt, ever. In Malabar, when little babies are being bathed, the nurse-maids sing a song that goes like this : "little legs, grow and grow, little hands, grow and grow..." I wanted to take the weeping city in my arms and sing soothing songs to it. I showered on it my blessings while the loud reports vibrated around our building. Dear city, let new merchandise fill your markets. Let the

wealthy devotees ring the bells at your temples every day. Let your courtesans grow sleek and beautiful day by day. Let your gardens resound with children's laughter. Let the haughty ladies who promenade on your Marine Drive grow haughtier, lovelier....

It was with relief that we heard that the planes were chased away by the anti-aircraft guns. Our house usually fills itself with writers and economists in the evening. Some of us were opposed to the Government's policy of helping Bangladesh and its refugees. Frankly we considered Bangladesh a pain in the neck. We knew that helping them would fracture our economy and win for us only fleeting praise from the international scene. We had enough hungry people of our own, enough homeless ones who slept on the pavements and under awnings. Often, returning from some dinner at the Taj Mahal Hotel, we had seen on its many door steps old men lying curled up braving the rain and coughing their lungs out. And, coming home I would see from my verandah the large empty buildings of the Sachivalaya, the State Bank of India and the All India Radio all shuttered and padlocked, with all that space going waste.

I have often wondered why the Government cannot pass an order that all huge buildings must let out their basement hall for the homeless during the harsh monsoons and during the winter. Every hotel can be made to spend one tenth of its daily earnings in feeding the poor. Charity is India's ancient tradition. There is no harm in reviving it when the times are hard. The British influence has changed the urban people's attitude towards beggary. They shout at those who arrive near the gate with outstretched arms. Do not encourage beggary, they shout at those who feel tempted to share their meal with the poor.

The newspapers are to be blamed for this callousness that has become fashionable. If one of them had the decency to report the giving away of alms by some charitable-minded person other kind people would follow the example if only to get some publicity. I long to read in the newspapers one story, just one little story, of some one giving away a few clothes to the poor, a few blankets in winter or some fruits for the children who wonder on the roads picking up their lunches from the

garbage heaps. We read only of the crimes and of the empty statements made by the ministers at some conference or other. The papers fill us with disgust. Why are the good deeds never reported ? To the west of our house is a park where an old man comes with two attendants every day to distribute oranges or mangoes to the poor children who wait for his arrival from the early hours of the morning. I am filled with pride when I watch him give the fruits to the little ones.

Disease and pain matured me. I forgot the art of localizing my love. I found it easy to love nearly all those who came to see us. Even to my husband I became a mother. He had to learn to adjust to my metamorphosis, for in his eyes even my broken-down doll of a body was attractive. It was not what it was years ago. Impartially I scrutinized its flaws and its virtues. It was like a cloth doll that had lost a few stitches here and there. The scars of operations decorated my abdomen like a map of the world painted crudely by a child. My breasts had a slight sag. And yet this form continued to beguile my poor husband. It upset him when I turned deeply religious.

I had shed carnal desire as a snake might shed its skin. I could no longer pretend either. I was no longer bed-worthy, no longer a charmer of lecherous men. But my poems had been read by several people. My articles on free love had titillated many. So I continued to get phone calls from men who wanted to proposition me. It was obvious to me that I had painted of myself a wrong image. I was never a nymphomaniac. Sex did not interest me except as a gift I could grant to my husband to make him happy. A few of our acquaintances tried to touch me and made indiscreet suggestions. I was horrified. When I showed my disgust at their behaviour they became my bitterest critics and started to spread scandals about me. If I were really promiscuous and obliging I would not have gained the hate and the notoriety that my indifference to sex has earned for me.

45

Return to Nalapat : Was my 24-year-old marriage on the rocks ?

On sedatives
I am more lovable
Says my husband
My speech becomes a mist-laden terrain,
The words emerge tinctured with sleep,
They rise from still coves of dreams
In unhurried flight like herons,
And my ragdoll-limbs adjust better
To his versatile lust. He would if he could
Sing lullabies to his wife's sleeping soul,
Sweet lullabies to thicken its swoon.
On sedatives
I grow more lovable
Says my husband....

As a marriage, in the conventional sense, mine was a flop. There were silences between the two of us that seemed to me interminable, although at times I broke them by a word or two about our little son or about the grocer's bill.

As a plaything for the slow Sunday afternoons and for the nights, I had deteriorated much in quality. I could not even feign lust, leave alone feel it. It needed strong tranquillisers to tame my body into an acquiescent posture beneath my virile mate.

For 32 years, ever since he graduated from the Loyola College, bagging a medal for Economics, he had been working for

the Reserve Bank and for the Cause of the Indian Agriculturist. As far back as I can recollect, his skin always smelt of the office files which were to be found under pillows and between the sheets, giving me the uneasy feeling of having rivals in my bed.

When I was young and needed his companionship for my emotional stability, he had sent me away to my grandmother for six months, only to be able to devote even his soul to the completion of a Rural Credit Survey Committee Report which his favourite boss was at that time obsessed with. Such subservience to his superiors may have built up his lacklustre career briefly for a while, but it certainly destroyed my pride in him.

Therefore when he told me, taking me into his confidence for the first time, that his new superior was unreasonably brutal with him, I only felt a sense of spiteful elation. I would have laughed aloud but another look at his ashen face made me control my mirth. I discovered with a shock, that he had changed imperceptibly with the dreary long years of the Reserve Bank routine. He had aged prematurely. Grey wisps of hair made for his face an untidy frame. His teeth had become discoloured and bad. All that he knew well was the Agricultural Report which was such an inconsequential component in the large jigsaw of his life.

I felt very sorry for him all of a sudden. What makes this man hate you so, I asked him. I don't know he said, feebly, perhaps he doesn't like my colour, my looks....

Every evening he brought his files home and once a week he flew to other cities hugging the papers on which he had worked half the night. And yet his boss was petty with him, waiting to catch him trip, so that he may be removed and a favourite installed in his place.

My husband had the feeling that the schemes that entailed foreign aid were not really helpful to the small farmer, but only helped the big agriculturist. He met with rude rebuttals or stony silences, pregnant with accusations, whenever he voiced his misgivings. Bureaucracy expected the smooth running of machines, the files moving from stale hand to stale hand for the

initiallings, but never, for a moment, wanted independent thinking to crop up like a loosened nail. Thinking was as bad as a blockage in the bowels of a computer. All the answers would then emerge wrong and very inconvenient.

If my husband had had a different kind of family, he would have learned to eat his humble pie quietely and without any fuss. But both our eldest son and I believed in socialism. We believed in one being scrupulously honest to oneself.

One day at the airport, early in the morning, while my husband and a few others of the Reserve Bank were waiting to catch a plane, his boss for no justifiable reason humiliated him. When the witnesses to the scene who were his prudent colleagues, vanished in a trice to save their own skins, my husband walked up to the telephone booth and phoned me. His voice was shaky, quavering like a sick man's. I only asked him, why do you always pick on me, my husband said on the phone, narrating the incident. He muttered abuses and snarled at me, he said.

I was angry. Resign immediately, get out of this humiliating job, we shall go to Nalapat House and live with dignity, I cried over the phone. Although we had as family friends, ministers, politicians and members of Parliament, none could help us, although they were aware that an honest, hardworking man was being tormented. My husband, when he does not stoop, stands six feet without his shoes, whereas the bully who made him lose his self-confidence, was a tiny marionette of a man who had the jerky movements of a tin-soldier.

It was of no use telling my husband to ignore the thrusts. is health broke down. His thyroid got affected. It was great torment for me and for my sons to see him suffer such ignominy at the hands of lesser men. I packed up my bags and left for my home in Malabar, carrying with me my third son.

I wanted my husband to think over the prospect of resigning from the Bank to settle down with me on my estate. For a proud Dravidian, humble pie of any kind is the unhealthiest diet. It was time that my husband realized it. His colleagues boycotted him. None came forward to sympathise with him

when he was ordered to vacate his chair and his room in three hours' time. People like us who believe in the essential dignity of human beings are always left isolated.

My eldest son Monoo went to Trivandrum to work under the guidance of Dr. K.N. Raj. This move pleased me. I sincerely believe in fraternizing with one's own type. If you have to survive, sanity and all, you must stick willy nilly to your own intellectual caste. Others can only misjudge you. For sheer survival, Duncan Grant, Roger Fry, Clive Bell, Lytton Strachey, Virginia Wolfe, Leonard Wolfe, Saxon Sydney Turner and a few others of intellectual eminence, huddled together in their famous Bloomsbury group, wary of infiltrators, for they knew that outside its barriers, they were doomed to feel excluded and lonely.

When I reached Malabar, my relatives looked askance at me. Why was I without my husband ? Had my outspoken autobiography that had been heraldically serialized in a well-known Malayali journal, finally brought about a separation ? Was my 24-year-old marriage on the rocks ?

I ignored their questions and set myself the task of cleaning up the old house. There were scorpions behind every photograph hung on the wall, lithe dark ones that curled up their tails when I lifted the picture and exposed them to the sun. Bats flew about in the evening but during the day, hung in clusters like some dark fruit from the rafters of the bathrooms. My child was terrified of these creatures, and of the civet cats that moved noisily on the ceilings. Each time one of them caught a mouse, the snarl and the squeak were frightening to the two of us who slept on our four-poster bed beneath the wooden ceiling.

Let us go back to Bombay, he cried on the first night after our return to Nalapat. I wrapped him in one of my soft silk sarees and lay near him, holding his little form in a tight embrace. This is our home, I told him. This is where we belong....

I have never heard the wind sing as beautifully as at Nalapat, over the tree-tops and the three ponds and at times, running up from the seashore, all smelling of fish and of the tar of

the fishing boats. I engaged seven servants to look after our needs. The house had a desolate air and there were stories circulated in the locality, of its many ghostly inhabitants.

My chief maid was a 70-year-old woman named Kalyani Amma, who told me that I ought to abandon the city-clothes and wear the traditional attire of the Nair woman. You must wear lots and lots of gold, she said. Otherwise at the temple pond where I go to bathe, the women will make fun of me. So I turned traditional. I gave away all my sarees to the typists of the village who were aspiring to move away to towns for new jobs and took to wearing the dress of my ancestresses, the three yards of white cloth as underwear and the two and a half as overwear. The white blouse and the heavy gold jewellery. The sandal paste drawn in a line on the forehead.

My servants were happy with me. I reclaimed the land and began to cultivate it. I sang ballads with my field-hands as they sowed the seed, standing knee deep in the mud. The mistress of the Nalapat house is back, they cried out in sheer happiness. At that moment I regretted the years spent in Bombay, Delhi and in Calcutta, separated from my house, my trees and my fields.

Each big tree at Nalapat had had on its bark, two feet above its base, my name engraved on it with a knife, but all except the fragrant Nirmatala were cut down. I wept at the arid look of the yard where once there were large shady trees that filtered the noonday sun, to make it fall soft as twilight on the white sand where we played as children. Even the old mango tree facing my grandmother's room was nowhere to be seen. When my grandfather lay dying, he had told his wife that the mango tree had dolls all over its branches, lovely dolls beckoning to him with their sunny smiles. Its absence hurt me like the death of a grandmother.

I walked around like a lost woman among the wild ferns, looking for old land-marks. I had taken a sentimental journey to my childhood-home. I did not want to return to the impersonal city and its tension, once again in disillusionment.

I cleared the snake shrine of all its weeds, scraped the lichen

off the idols and lit the stone lamps. I engaged a carpenter to repair the garners where in my grandmother's days, the harvested grain used to be stored. My child learnt carpentry from him. We bought two cows.

It was an idyllic existence. My husband, coming to us on leave, found us looking fat and sleek. He felt tempted to resign from the Reserve Bank and settle down with us, but he said, let us wait for another year, let Chinnen complete his College education. Bombay was a mistake, he said.

How right he was. I should never have taken to wearing the coloured clothes of the city. I should have dressed only in white and I should have loaded my limbs with gold. I should never have done house-keeping at a small flat owned by the Reserve Bank of India, or worried about the payment of the grocer's bills. I belonged to the serenity of Nalapat. Nalapat belonged to me. By abandoning it to the care of vulgar caretakers and managers, I had hurt the spirit of the house. I HAD UNWITTINGLY SPILT THE BLOOD OF ITS SPIRIT....

46

Only the wealthy hated me ... they spread lush scandals about me

---

Towards the Slaughter-yard :

The Intensive Cardiac Care Unit
Is where the lidless fisheyes of bulbs burn on,
Blind to the night's thinning out into light beyond the wall
And the day spilling itself out on crowding streets;
The intensive cardiac care unit
Is where the weary travellers pause to pitch a tent, the oasis
For a night's rest before the long crossing
On camel-back through hot sand;
The intensive cardiac care unit
Is where each lies in his own white tent
Under harsh desert moons,
Buried only neck deep in sleep, so that with unhooded head
He awaits his execution,
And half-grown nightmares crouch under beds,
And moody as distant drums sound the heart beat;
The intensive cardiac care unit
Is where the tall dark doctor comes at midnight, visiting,
Called up from the depths of dreams, out of breath,
The bulbs blurring in his eyes, the aging faces blurring
On their pillows, while sleep grazes at his brow,
His great shoulders,
His knees, and like a vagrant cow nods its head and moves on....

Although I was a favourite with the students of my home-state who supported my plea for a new kind of morality, I was an eyesore to my relatives who thought me to be a threat to their respectability.

They had grown up as components of the accursed feudal system that prevailed in Malabar until two decades ago and had their own awesome skeletons in the cupboards of the past. Being members of affluent joint families, they had had ample leisure to nurture their concupiscence, feeding it with the juices of the tender daughters of their serfs and retainers. They feared that I would write of their misdeeds, of the accidental deaths in the locality and of the true immorality which takes shelter nowhere else but in the robust arms of our society.

They took their grievances to my parents who were embarrassed but totally helpless, for it had become clear to them that I had become a truth-addict and that I loved my writing more than I loved them or my own sons. If the need ever arose, I would without hesitation bid goodbye to my doting husband and to my sons, only to be allowed to remain what I was, a writer.

I myself had no control over my writing which emerged like a rash of prickly heat in certain seasons. A few of the elderly men of my village came to visit me slyly, when the evening had darkened and sat on the easychairs, smiling vacuously and in silence. I had gone there without my husband and besides, had I not confessed in my writings to have had a couple of love affairs? They came with whetted appetites and looked like sick hounds. I had to get my old maidservant to assist me in getting rid of them without much fanfare.

My enemies increased in number day by day, although for a few weeks, I was unaware. While I was away in Trivandrum, acting as a judge on the Regional Film Awards Committee, they buried an urn somewhere in my yard, hoping to kill me with the rites of sorcery. I chose to ignore the warnings given by my servants. One day I found on the ledge of our well, a decapitated cat and on inspecting it minutely, I found my name engraved on a copper piece, an egg, some turmeric and a lot of stuff that resembled vermillion stuffed inside its body. Then I realized that I too should try some magic to scare my foes away. I hung a picture of Kali on the wall of my balcony and adorned it daily with long strings of red flowers, resembling the intestines of a disembowelled human being. Anyone walking

along the edge of my paddy field a furlong away, could see the Goddess and the macabre splash of red. This gave the villagers a fright.

I toyed with the idea of keeping a good watch-dog but could not find one. I kept many servants, but finally, two of them succumbed to bribes and attempted to poison me. There is a basic decency in the poor which will prevent them from being disloyal or cruel to one who has loved them. They could bring themselves to administer poison only in insufficient doses. I saw the relief on their faces when I came down the stairs in the morning, alive and more or less normal.

My servants loved me. The fieldhands loved me. Only the wealthy hated me. They spread lush scandals about my way of life.

In actuality, my life was simple and uncomplicated. In the morning, my maid brought up for me, a tray of tea things. After tea, I went out to inspect my rice and my vegetables. I fed my cows. Breakfast. After that, playing some game with my little son until it was bath time, and my young maidservant came to me with the henna for my palms and feet. An oil bath. Prayers in the puja room where a Nambudiri Brahmin worshipped scientifically my three deities, Ganapati, Surya and Lakshmi. Lunch at twelve and sleep until tea time, when the tray came up the stairs, laden with tea and sweets, an hour of writing or of the study of Sanskrit. Then downstairs, once again, to walk under the trees with my son. Dinner at seven-thirty and reading until nine.

Not even Mrs. Grundy would have found fault with my morals, but the village talked in whispers of my lovers. Subtly I was harassed until one night, I collapsed with a heart attack and lay on the floor all damp like a baked fish. My child trunk-called to my brother Mohandas who came from Calicut, to carry me to a nursing home.

In the car during the three hours' journey, my child held my hand and whimpered. I told myself that I was not prepared to die. This beautiful child was not to be left motherless. My paddy had to be harvested. I had only begun my career as an

agriculturist. At Calicut, I was admitted into a private nursing home owned by one of the best heart-specialists of the country. After the crisis was over, they removed me to a room that faced the red road which I watched from my bed.

People passed by, wearing coloured clothes and occasionally a car. There was a No Visitors sign on my door which kept even death away, although I dreamt one afternoon that it came to me disguised as a woodpecker and began to peck at my bones. Then it changed itself into a water fowl, the kind I used to see near the pond at Nalapat, while I was a child living there with my grandmother, and then it ruffled the rivulets of my blood, a little haemo-bird trapped in a migrant's trance.

I woke up sweating. My maidservant told me that a young man had come several times to the door wanting to see me. He wants you to sign in his book, she said.

I heard his voice and liked its velvet thickness and so he was called in. He was only a blur at the foot of my bed. What is your name, I asked him. I am Mohan, he said, I am at a loss for words. Be safe in your silence, Mohan, I wrote in his book and envied him, his capacity for silence. With words, I had destroyed my life. I had used them like swords in what was meant to be a purification dance, but blood was unwittingly shed. Next morning from the young man, there was a gift of roses which came in many hues, including two of a pale heliotrope which I fondled for a long while. The roses remained on my window sill for three days. I wanted to see the man and thank him for the happiness his flowers had given me, but he did not appear again.

After three weeks of rest, I coaxed my doctor to send me home, because it was the time of harvest and I wished to be present, to glory in my achievement. While I was being driven home, I saw near the mountain passes, the aged cattle being taken to the slaughter yard. I saw their thin haunches and the vermillion brand on their shoulders.

I wanted to, just for one brief moment, get down from the car and join them. Human beings are never branded with a hot iron. They are only sent home with their electrocardiographs and sedatives.

47

The sorcerer came on a bike at night. . .

From the debris of house-wrecks
Pick up my broken face,
Your bride's face,
Changed a little with the years.
I shall not remember
The betrayed honeymoon;
We are both such cynics,
You and I.
If loving me was hard then
It's harder now
But love me one day
For a lark
Love the sixty-seven
Kilogrammes of aging flesh
Love the damaged liver,
The heart and its ischaemia,
Yes, love me one day
Just for a lark,
Show me what our life would have been
If only you had loved....

After my return from the nursing home, life became difficult for me. My eldest son who had come to be by my side during my illness, fell ill, contracting measles from my little son. Both were delirious with the high fever and I saw on their faces an ominous glaze.

I still hugged to my left side the pain I went to the hospital with, and to eat the sedatives prescribed for me, I was not willing. I wanted to remain awake and vigilant at the bedside

of my son who stared at me with unseeing eyes mottled by red veins.

In the village there was no ice to be had, to lower his temperature. All I could do was place a wet cloth on his forehead and remove it when it dried. I grew panicky and soon was so demoralised that I took my maid's advice and summoned a sorcerer to find out if our enemies were bringing us such misfortune.

The sorcerer came on a bike at night displaying his glossy smile. He was taken up to the balcony where he drew a diagram and spread out his cowrie shells to begin his esoteric calculations. He was a young man of a robust build with wavy hair and a gleaming skin. He wore round his neck a thick chain of gold with a round locket. He gave me three strings, one for my wrist and the others for my sons. They have done Mahamaran to kill you, he said, but we shall try to save your children.

I gave him Rs. 20 for his words of assurance and sent him away. The strings were tied round the wrists of my sons who were too weak to protest. But towards dawn, after having debated within for six sleepless hours, I cut them and threw them out of the window. Finally, Tetracycline cured my sons.

I could hardly walk for the ache that remained like a sickle imbedded in my left breast. So I sent a message to my husband who came at once from Bombay to be with us. When I heard his heavy footfalls on the stairs, I clapped my hands in sheer happiness. I was going to be secure again. The little son told him, take us with you to Bombay, or else we will surely die here...

Leaving the property to the care of a cousin and a servant, I left once more for Bombay. I had had enough of experimenting and was definitely desirous of settling down to a normal life. My son who had been a victim of chronic Rheumatic fever, had improved with two years of taking Penicillin. He himself suggested that we send him to a school. He wanted us to find for him a kind school unlike the one he had once been attending, where the teachers were impersonal and curt.

My husband chose the Dunne Institute and admitted him in the fourth standard.

He came home with great excitement. Amma, my teacher is very kind to me, he said and I embraced him from my bed, grateful to God for this mercy. The child liked all his teachers and even on days when he felt ill, he egged me to send him to school. During the weekends he edited a mini-mag which he called *Oushanasa* where he wrote verses and stories under different pen-names.

I learnt for the first time to be miserly with my energy, spending it only on my writing, which I enjoyed more than anything else in the world. I typed sitting propped against pillows on my wide bed. Large areas of my ignorance had been obliterated by the lessons I had learnt from my life and I wanted my readers to know of it. I had realized by then that the writer has none to love her but the readers. She would have proved herself to be a mere embarrassment to the members of her family, for she is like a goldfish in a well-lit bowl whose movements are never kept concealed.

I have often wished to take myself apart and stick all the bits, the heart, the intestines, the liver, the reproductive organs, the skin, the hair and all the rest on a large canvas to form a collage which could then be donated to my readers. I have no secrets at all. Each time I have wept, the readers have wept with me. Each time I walked to my lover's houses dressed like a bride, my readers have walked with me. I have felt their eyes on me right from my adolescence when I published my first story and was called controversial. Like the eyes of an all-seeing God they follow me through the years.

Illness and my writing helped me to turn into an island. People had to go out of their way to visit me. In canoes they came and in yachts. My prayers and its corollaries of silent meditation helped me to become vaguely telepathic. If someone walked into my drawing room who did not like me, I sensed the secret hostility and refused to see him, or her. I withdrew my head into my quilt and remained in my closed bedroom which was also my workroom.

I wanted only love and kindness. Hate of any kind would ruin my work. I did not have even the little strength needed to brush my hair. There was no wisdom in wasting my strength in sitting on a sofa talking with people who secretly disliked me but came out of curiosity. By and by, all the non-intellectuals began to stay away. Only genuine friends arrived in my house to see me. They brought me glad tidings and peace.

I typed nearly a thousand words a week. I wrote about the subjects the editors asked me to write on, fully aware that I was uneducated by the usual standards and that I had no business meddling in grave matters. But how happily I meddled to satisfy that particular brand of readers who liked me and liked my honest approach. I was useless as a housewife anyway. I could not pick up a teapot without gasping for breath. But writing was possible. And it certainly brought me happiness.

48

The ancient hungers that once tormented me were fulfilled

When you learn to swim
Do not enter a river that has no ocean
To flow into, one ignorant of destinations
And knowing only the flowing as its destiny,
Like the weary rivers of the blood
That bear the scum of ancient memories,
But go, swim in the sea,
Go swim in the great blue sea,
Where the first tide you meet is your body,
That familiar pest,
But if you learn to cross it,
You are safe, yes, beyond it you are safe,
For even sinking would make no difference then...

During the long weeks of my convalescence I was obsessed with the recollections of my childhood days spent at Nalapat. The hazy siesta banked in the heart of little pills prescribed to quieten the flutter of my heart was bruised with the voices of the dead and with the sights once familiar to me at Nalapat.

For hours I had played in the sunlit pond behind the house flailing the water with my girl-thin limbs, while the turtles moved about in its hostile depths and eels stared at me with their opal eyes but in all those unfenced hours I had felt no fear, nor even joy but an anonymous peace.

My dreams as always glowed pearl-white, they seemed hardly

mortal, but as evening came, snake-like I shed their silver coils and woke to meet an alien world that talked of casual sins. I had desired to possess the sense, the courage to pick myself an average identity, to age through years of earthy din gently like a cut flower until it was time to be removed, but I had wandered, fog-eyed, seeking another, to be mine, my own to love or destroy and to share with me the dimlit gloom where I moved like a fawn.

I was physically destroyed beyond resurrection. But while my body lay inert on my sick bed, my mind leapt up like a waking greyhound and became alert. It had said goodbye to its sleep. All the ancient hungers that had once tormented my lithe body were fulfilled. Not even the best-looking man in the world would any longer arouse in me an appetite for love.

If my desires were lotuses in a pond, closing their petals at dusk and opening out at dawn once upon a time, they were now totally dead, rotted and dissolved, and for them there was no more to be a re-sprouting. The pond had cleared itself of all growth. It was placid.

If my parents had talked to me and pointed out the wrong path and the right, I would still have led the life I led. I sincerely believe that knowledge is exposure to life. I could never bring myself to hang my life on the pegs of quotations for safety. I never did play safe. I compromised myself with every sentence I wrote and thus I burnt all the boats that would have reached me to security.

What did I finally gain from life ? Only the vague hope that there are a few readers who have loved reading my books although they have not wished to inform me of it. It is for each of them that I continue to write, although the abusive letters keep pouring in. I tweak the noses of the puritans but I am that corny creature, the sad clown, who knows that the performance is over and that the audiences are safely tucked in their beds with all their laughter now forgotten. Their domestic worries have taken over.

Where is the time for them to remember the jokes and the footlights of the stage ? Some of my Communist friends ask me

what I have done in my life for the common man. Should I not have written with a social conscience ? Should I not have written solely of the poor and the downtrodden ? I remain silent.

The poor emerge out of invisible holes in the morning bearing the burden of their hunger and wander around looking for edible garbage. I watch them when I am well enough to stand in my verandah.

I watch the young woman who is mad, being tormented by loafers while she lies asleep at the foot of a tree, half-clad. I notice the passing days wrinkle her face and emaciate her once plump body. Whose daughter is she ? Where has she misplaced her parents ? On some mornings she appears naked, sauntering past our house with a smile on her lips, and we throw her a housecoat or a saree which she accepts without once looking up to see the giver, nonchalantly, as though she had expected the sky to rain down on her head only soft garments.

I watch the little boys of the poor crowding round the bhelpuriwala's handcart, only to have the pleasure of watching the richer ones eat. I have seen their wise eyes and their lengthy contemplation. The poor are fatalists by nature and by tradition. Or else where would we be now, the selfish, self-centred ones, obsessed by our weight problems, our tax problems and our colour problems ?

The poor would have risen like a locust storm and devoured us by now; they would have picked our over-ripened flesh from the bones and left us in scraps on the garbage heaps. Yes, I do see the writing on the wall, although it is very faint. I shudder for one moment but I shudder in delicious anticipation.

The ailing have a lot of time to ponder over the grave issues of the world. I do very little work. Once or twice my hand may sweep a duster over my writing desk. I may comb my long hair to unsnarl it before going to bed at night. But always like an inexpensive timepiece ticking away merrily, loudly, my brain goes a-ticking. I draw out plans of action which I hope to convey to the rulers of the country.

I plan to organize a campaign to collect a rupee from every

middle-class home to build low-cost tenements where the slum-dwellers can be housed so that we may see their children grow up healthy and without that utter hopelessness dimming their young eyes. I plan to request the hoteliers to set aside one-tenth of their income to feed the poor every day.

As President of the Jyotsna Arts and Education Society, I climb the stage occasionally to talk to the public of my dream of starting a residential school based on the Gurukul system where we shall get teachers from many countries, hand-picked ones with a sense of dedication, each of whom will live as a parent with ten of the pupils in one of the many cottages set aside for the school.

Nobody comes forward to turn these dreams to reality. The world outside my house is always so busy catching buses, balancing the accounts in large ledgers, lobbying for de-classed politicians, pimping for the impotent and hiding their ill-gotten wealth in concealed lockers in the W.C.

None has asked me what I think of Indira Gandhi, of Kissinger or of Jayaprakash Narayan. I am told to think of God and to try and make peace with Him so that I may not have the raw deal that I have had here up there too, but an easier time.

49

Who were we to sit beside their favourite God ?

The cicadas in brambled foliage
Naturally concave. So also these
Men who climb up the cogged scaffoldings
Building houses for the alien rich.
On some days the hot sky flings at us scraps
Of Telugu songs and we intently
Listen, but we wait in vain for the harsh
Message of the lowly. In merry tunes
Their voices break, but just a little, as
Though the hero's happiness is too big
A burden on their breath, too big a lie
For their throats to swallow, but past sunset
Their jests sound ribald, their lust seems robust.
Puny these toy-men of dust, fathers of light
Dust-children, but their hands like the withered boughs
Of some mythic hoodoo tree cast only
Cool shadows, and with native grace bestow
Even on unbelievers vast shelters....

When I was a young woman living at Cuffe Parade, there were no buildings at Nariman Point but only the sea, marshy in the little coves, but clean and blue in the distance where a boat or two swung gently on its waves. Later the sea was forced to recede, reminding one of a receding hairline, and on the land reclaimed tall buildings were constructed.

The builders in Bombay are chiefly those of Andhra Pradesh who have by now become domiciles and speak Marathi with their children. They are dark wiry people with loud voices and

a running gait that tells the watcher how they value time and are always in a hurry. When a building is being constructed they live on its precincts in huts made of mud-bricks and corrugated iron.

Beyond the ministers' cottages and behind the large new structures is a colony where the builders live. It is a tiny village in itself with dirt roads and milch goats tethered to poles and a well where the women gather with pots in the evenings.

During the week dedicated to the worship of Lord Ganesha, the inhabitants erect a rude stage and instal an idol. Then there is loud music in the evenings after the work is over and the bath and the cooking. Some of them use little cymbals of brass and clang-clang to the tune of the hymns while the round-eyed children squat on the ground and watch in admiration.

From the houses nearby the upper middle classes protest vehemently, for they do not wish such plebian exuberance to spoil their tranquil hours. They wish to have their evening whiskey in peace, talking of books and love affairs and office promotions. If there is to be music let it be that of Balamurali or Kumar Gandharva.

The poor are bad singers. Their voices grate as though the dust of their surroundings have entered their throats and their lungs. But no complaint can stop the house builders from enjoying themselves during the Ganesh festival. The men drink hard, and raise their voices in His praise. The song rises like a tired snake who has finally reconciled itself to its destiny which is to uncurl out of the snake charmer's basket and sway.

Even while the cultured voices discussed poetry inside my drawing room, I heard that song and sensed the joy of the singers. Finally, unable to control myself any longer I dragged my husband to the colony one evening to see the ones who were singing. The people on the platform dipped their voices when they saw us enter. We were outsiders but we were anyway welcome. How happily the children smiled at us ! Sit down, said one of the organizers, an old toothless man, pointing to the platform. Who were we to sit beside their favourite God ? I felt humbled by their good-will.

We sat on the ground with the children, who had all been given baths and were gleaming like rosewood carvings. The singers became self-conscious for a while but then they relaxed to sing as loud as before. What did they have in their lives to be so happy about ? I was pining for yet another settee for the drawing-room while these grand men and women were working from morning till dusk carrying cement and climbing the scaffoldings. And yet they had more vitality than I had and more of optimism. I returned home with the awareness that I had led a paltry existence, thinking only of my drawing room's furniture and of my loved ones.

How vast really was my world ! My gloom lay in its littlest corner like a black dog. I had had the idiocy to think of myself as Kamala, a being separate from all the rest and with a destiny entirely different from those of others.

The idea of our world being round and our life being a cycle has tripped us up. If we were to forget the words past, present and future and were to see life as a collage, a vast assembly of things and people and emotions we shall stop grieving for the dead, stop pining for the living and stop accumulating visible wealth.

What exists must exist. Only the compositions will change. Tomorrow my soul might migrate into the womb of a house-builder's woman and I might be one of the happy children squatting to see the pink Ganapati. Both happiness and unhappiness are mine to enjoy. I have no end. Nothing has an end. Instead of an end, all that we suffer is a discomposition.

Often I have toyed with the idea of drowning myself to be rid of my loneliness which is not unique in anyway but is natural to all. I have wanted to find rest in the sea and an escape from involvements. But rest is a childish fancy, a very minor hunger. The sharks' hunger is far greater than mine.

There is a hunger in each of us to feed other hungers, the basic one, to crumble and dissolve and to retain in other things the potent fragments of oneself. But ultimately we shall discover that we are immortal and that the only mortal things are systems and arrangements.

Even our pains shall continue in those who have devoured us. The oft-repeated moves of every scattered cell shall give no power to escape from cages of involvement. We are trapped in immortality and our only freedom is the freedom to discompose....

50

I have ceased to fear death. . .

Two months ago an eminent cardiologist of Bombay, who is a friend of ours, dropped in at my place in the afternoon to take my E.C.G. He told me with great solicitude that I ought to remove myself to the Intensive Cardiac Unit of a nearby hospital as soon as I could, unless I wished to die in a short while, deteriorating in health day by day, until my feet and my face turned swollen, and I became too helpless to move out of my bed.

He held my hand in his and added that he would not have cautioned me so bluntly if I were less intelligent, less brave. Weep if you must, he said, but pack your things before the evening and get your husband to bring you to the hospital. Then he lit a cigarette.

I remained silent. I did not want to tell him that I woke from my bed on some days with a puffiness beneath my eyes and that I had fainted several times during my morning prayers, sitting cross-legged for nearly an hour, reciting my mantras and collapsing suddenly in a heap on the floor.

Whenever my feet swelled up I tucked them beneath the folds of my sari. Whenever I felt a great wringing pain at my side or in my left arm I thrust a Sorbitrate tablet under my tongue and felt its warmth dilating my arteries. I was no stranger to the many signals of warning. But going once again to the hospital was an unpleasant prospect.

I have always regarded the hospital as a planet situated like a sandwich filling between the familiar earth and the strange

domain of death. Each time I have been admitted into a hospital-room I have been seized with an acute desire to be left alone. At that moment I am like a honeymooner who desires total privacy for herself and her mate.

Illness has become my mate, bound by ties of blood and nerves and bone, and, I hold with it, long secret conversations. I tell my heart disease that I have just entered my forties and that my little son still sleeps with his right thumb in his mouth and the left hand tucked inside my nightie, between my breasts.

I tell it that my ancestral home, now under repair, is still unplastered because of the cement shortage and that I would like to live in it for at least a year before my death. I entreat the illness to quieten the ache at my side...

Soon after the admission, the honorary chosen to take care of you, the knight-errant prescribed to fight your battles with the dragon of death, comes to your bedside and undresses you with the help of a nurse, trying to locate the unmanifested symptoms, which in due course will build up for him the ultimate diagnosis. At the touch of his hands your body blushes purple.

Outside your door he talks solemnly with your loved ones. You only hear an incoherent murmur. Besides, by then you would have ceased to care. You have become a mere number. Along with your clothes, which the nurse took off, was removed your personality-traits. Then the pathologist's henchmen rush at you for specimens of your blood, sputum, urine and bowel-movement.

With all those little jamjars filled and sealed, every vestige of your false dignity is thus removed. In the X'Ray room, another nurse unwraps your body while the wardboy who wheeled you in watches furtively from the dark. The display of breasts is the legitimate reward for his labour.

A booming voice orders you to take a deep, deep breath, and lying on the ice-cold X'Ray table you feel secretly amused because you would not have been here at all if taking a deep breath was that easy but you would be walking hand in hand with your little son or seeing a film or picnicking under a fragrant tree.

No, I will not dream of going back to a hospital, I said to the doctor. He gave a friendly shrug. The room was filled with his cigarette-smoke.

It is not that I am afraid of the injections and the drips and all the rest, I said. It is just that I have stopped fearing death...

I have been for years obsessed with the idea of death. I have come to believe that life is a mere dream and that death is the only reality. It is endless, stretching before and beyond our human existence. To side into it will be to pick up a new significance. Life has been, despite all emotional involvements, as ineffectual as writing on moving water. We have been mere participants in someone else's dream.

I am at peace. I liken God to a tree which has as its parts the leaves, the bark, the fruits and the flowers each unlike the other in appearance and in texture but in each lying dissolved the essence of the tree, the whatness of it. Quiditus. Each component obeys its own destiny. The flowers blossom, scatter pollen and dry up. The fruits ripen and fall. The bark peels. Each of us shall obey that colossal wisdom, the taproot of all wisdom and the source of all consciousness.

I have left colourful youth behind. Perhaps I mixed my pleasures as carelessly as I mixed my drinks and passed out too soon on the couch of life. But does it matter at all? I have turned weary and frigid. My heart resembles a cracked platter that can no more hold anything. But at daybreak lovers still cling at doorways with wet eyes, wet limbs, speaking the words I once spoke.

Perhaps I shall die soon. The jewellery I adorn my body with, in order to look like a bride awaiting her love, shall survive me. The books I have collected, the bronze idols I have worshipped with flowers and all the trinkets stored in my lifetime shall endure, but not I.

Out of my pyre my grieving sons shall pick up little souvenirs of bones and some ash. And yet the world shall go on. Tears shall dry on my sons' cheeks. Their wives shall bring forth brilliant children. My descendants shall populate this earth. It is enough for me. It is more than enough... □□□

Auto of an Indian Woman Writer..